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PRESENTS

TVR LEGENDS

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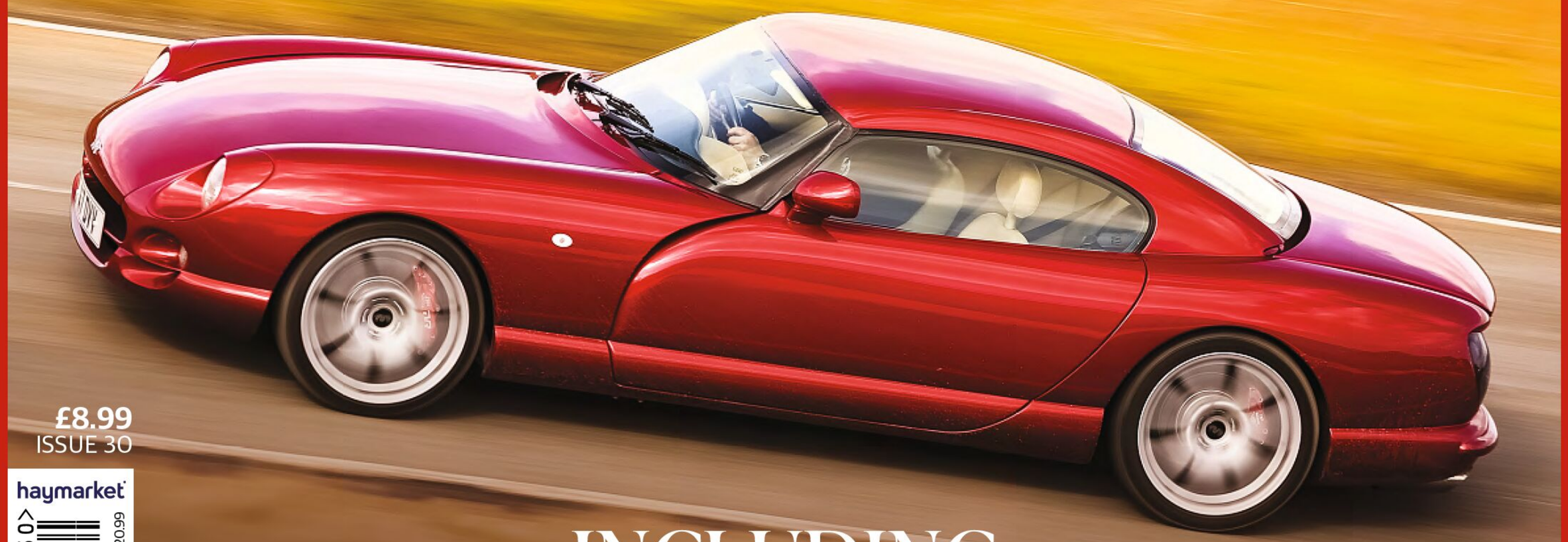

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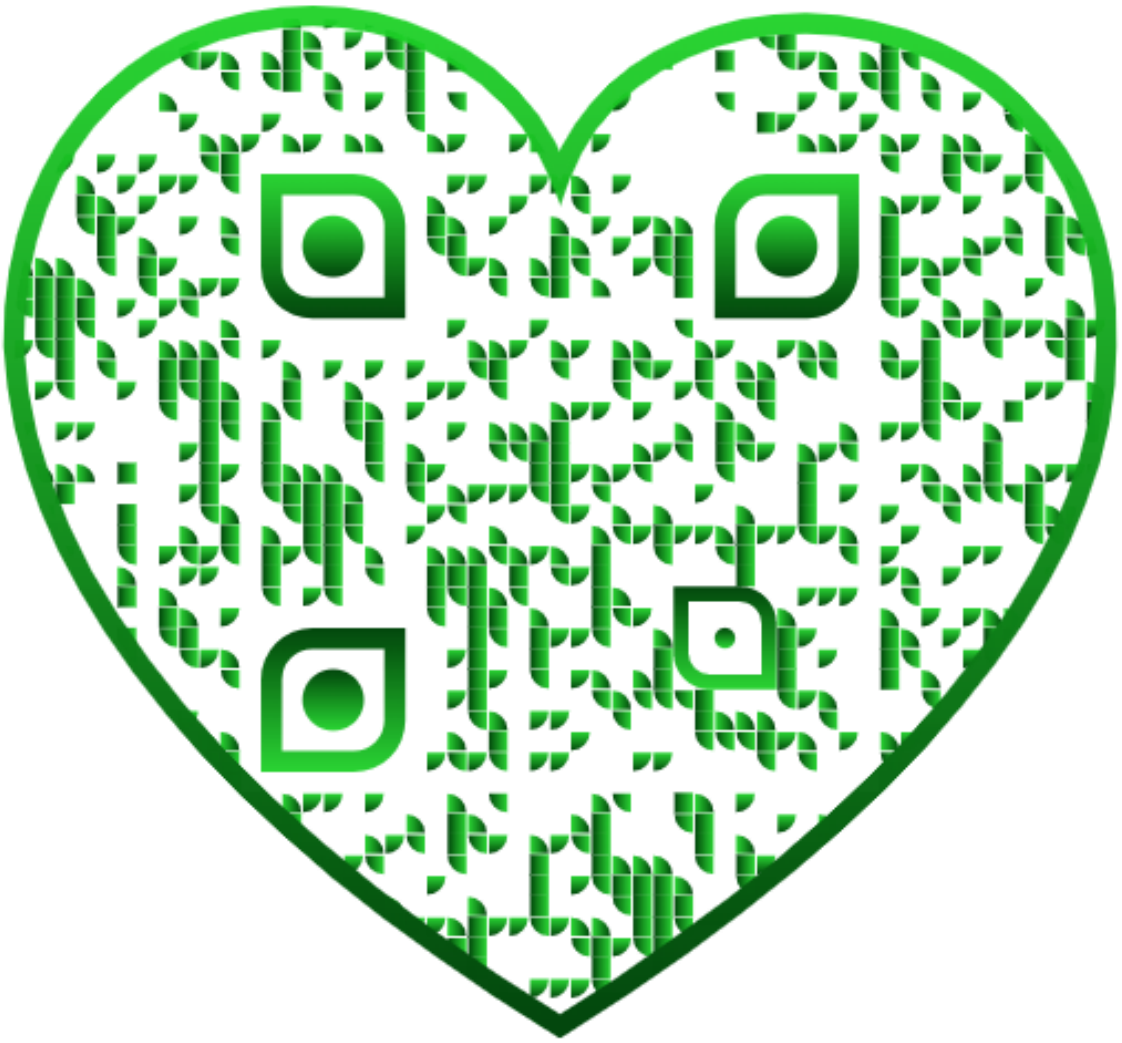

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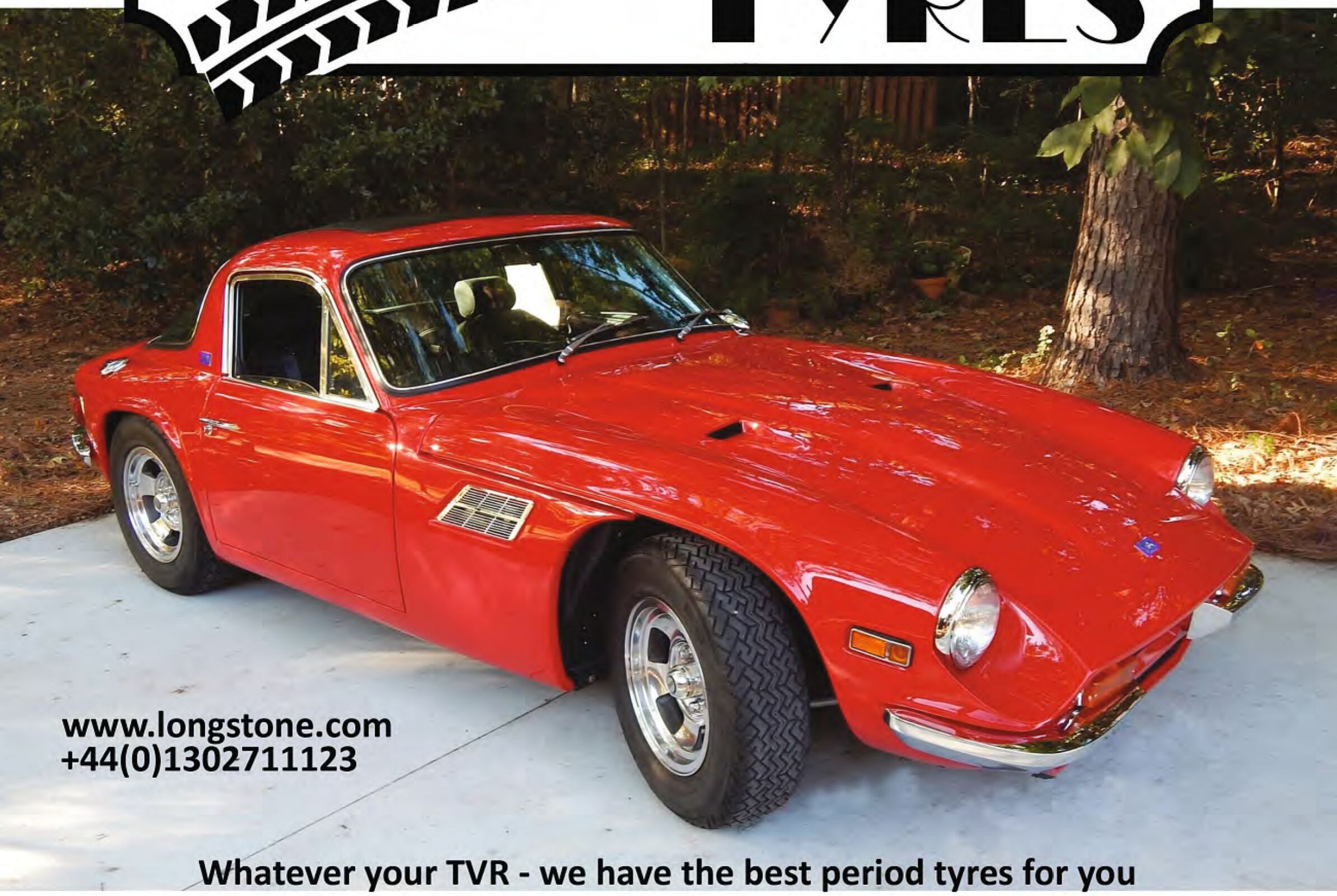

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Welcome

The story of TVR is a rollercoaster ride worthy of the Pleasure Beach just a short drive from its Blackpool home. Rather than focus on the highs and lows, the best way to get to know TVR is to meet four men, the first being founder Trevor Wilkinson, whose name gave rise to the brand. His Trevcar Motors, later TVR Engineering, evolved from building a Ford sidevalve-powered Special in 1949 to nailing down the TVR formula – steel tubular chassis, glassfibre body, proprietary power – in the late-'50s Grantura.

When the first of many crises hit, enthusiast Martin Lilley and his dad, Arthur, stepped in to save the firm in 1965. Martin was the second TVR hero, providing a stable footing and driving it forward through his passion for the cars and their promotion. He would twice reinvent the range, and court controversy with his motor-show stunts, before handing over to another enthusiast-turned-boss, Peter Wheeler, in 1981. It was he who slotted in the long-serving Rover V8, swapped the wedge for muscle and curves, and even developed TVR's own engines.

That just leaves Nikolai Smolenski, who took the helm in 2004 and, sadly, steered the good ship TVR on to the rocks. Hope springs eternal that this charismatic marque could yet return, but in the meantime we hope you enjoy this collection of our favourite TVR tales from the past 30 years of *C&SC* (turn to p5 to find out when each first appeared).

ALASTAIR CLEMENTS

Editor in chief, *Classic & Sports Car*

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Contents

EARLY DAYS

6 **FIRST AMONG SEQUELS**
Sideways in a rare lightweight Grantura, the first 'production' model *May 2025*

14 **TAKING TO THE TRACK**
Artist Tim Layzell recalls his Goodwood Revival in a Grantura *December 2019*

20 **AT THE SHARP END**
The spectacular Trident could have taken TVR into the GT league *September 2008*

24 **ONE-HIT WONDERS**
Counting down those Blackpool sports cars that remained unique *October 2018*

MEET THE NEW BOSS

28 **RETURN OF THE SAVIOUR**
One-time owner Martin Lilley heads to the old factory to reminisce *May 2007*

33 **YELLOW PERIL**
A passionate TVR fan's mission to revive an abandoned Vixen Series 3 *June 2011*

34 **SIX OF THE BEST**
The story of a lifelong desire to restore a Triumph-powered 2500 *July 2019*

40 **SETTING THE TEMPLATE**
The Tuscan SE civilised the Griffith recipe of light weight and V8 punch *May 2004*

44 **PLASTIC, AND FANTASTIC**
3000M meets Marcos 3-Litre in a Ford V6-powered coupé shootout *July 1999*

48 **OPEN AND SHUT CASE**
Which is the best M-series variant, open 3000S or Taimar hatch? *November 2003*

54 **GTs IN MINIATURE**
V6 Taimar takes on straight-six Triumph GT6 and potent MGB GT V8 *June 2007*

60 **GETTING A BOOST**
Britain's first production turbo turned the Taimar into a monster *July 2012*

66 **SOUNDS OF THE '70S**
3000S faces period rivals from Porsche, Mercedes, Alfa and Triumph *March 2008*

76 **BIRTH OF THE WEDGE**
Stylist Oliver Winterbottom introduces the Tasmin design revolution *July 2017*

82 **FUN ON A BUDGET**
The Tasmin and bargain alternatives from Reliant, Jensen and Triumph *August 1999*

88 **AT THE SHARP END**
Winterbottom's wonders: Tasmin and Lotus Éclat compared *September 2010*

WHEELER AND BEYOND

96 **WILD ROVERS**
TVR, Morgan, TR, MG and Marcos led the Rover V8 sports-car charge *June 2019*

104 **GENERATION SHIFT**
A memorable cross-country blast with wedge and Chimaera *December 2018*

112 **JUNIOR SUPERCAR SHOWDOWN**
420SEAC stakes its claim against Ferrari, Porsche, Alpine and Lotus *July 2001*

120 **TO THE POINT**
The mighty 450SE was the culmination of TVR's wedge evolution *April 2000*

122 **YOUTH OR EXPERIENCE?**
TVR S3 battles Triumph TR4 as modern classics meet their ancestors *July 2011*

134 **JOINING THE MAINSTREAM**
The brilliant Griffith made a realistic rival to the Porsche Boxster *December 2004*

140 **RIVALS THROUGH THE ERAS**
The Chimaera was a spiritual successor to Austin-Healey and Triumph *April 2011*

146 **MAGICAL HISTORY TOUR**
From Blackpool to the proposed site of TVR's new dawn by Griffith *October 2017*

154 **SHARED HEARTS**
Which Rover V8 roadster is best: Griffith, Marcos Mantara or MG RV8? *March 2024*

162 **MONSTERS' BALL**
Thunderous V8 Cerbera meets its match in the V10 Chrysler Viper GTS *July 2014*

170 **HARDY MILLENNIALS**
Outrageous Tuscan S takes on the Noble M12 and Porsche 911 *September 2024*

178 **LIFTING THE LID**
Two targa-topped beauties, as Tuscan S fights Ferrari F355 GTS *February 2012*

180 **TAKEN TO THE EXTREME**
The T440R was the ultimate Tuscan, and the basis for a tilt at Le Mans *April 2024*

186 **FAMILY REUNION**
The wild Sagaris, TVR's final new model, meets its predecessors *January 2007*

'IT GOADS YOU INTO UNNECESSARY HOONERY, JUST FOR THE HELL OF IT'

TVR's Grantura made sports-car racing accessible, but company hardship curtailed its full potential, epitomised by a rare, Climax-powered lightweight

WORDS **SIMON HUCKNALL** PHOTOGRAPHY **JACK HARRISON**

You couldn't really fault TVR's chutzpah at the dawn of the 1960s. Despite being in financial freefall, the small Blackpool company mooted a potential Le Mans works entry to raise its profile in international motorsport. While common sense eventually prevailed and the plan was dropped due to a lack of funds, it certainly influenced the production of four works-prepared Grantura models designed specifically for competition use. The earliest of those is now being offered for sale, giving us a rare insight into what might have been a game-changer for TVR at the time.

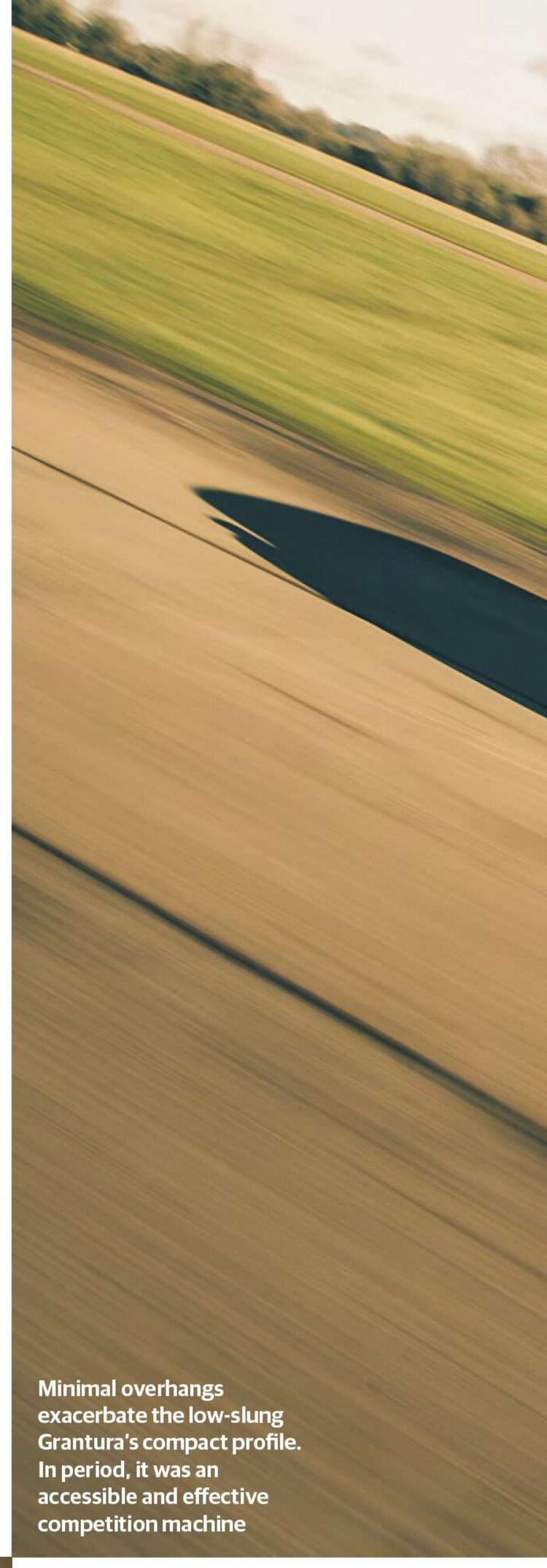
We'll return to this remarkably original car and the intriguing mystery that surrounds its racing provenance. When new, it epitomised TVR's – and its customers' – enthusiasm for competition through various iterations of the Grantura from the late 1950s. Trevor Wilkinson (T, V and R are plucked from his Christian name) developed his first chassis in 1949, powered by a Ford sidevalve 'four' and dressed with a rudimentary glassfibre body.

The basic tubular backbone chassis design was honed during the early 1950s. By 1955, the suspension had become all-independent via trailing arms and transverse torsion bars derived from the Volkswagen Beetle. An open-bodied model was built around this, mainly for the American market, using a 1098cc Coventry Climax engine, forming the basis for the now more familiar hardtop coupé that was to follow in 1957. This in turn begat, from 1958, what would become known as the Grantura, TVR's first fully in-house-styled model and its first genuine production car.

The Grantura capitalised on the emerging club-racer set's demand for a simple, light and competent road-legal track car available with a variety of engines to suit different budgets. Despite TVR's best efforts to appeal to road-only users with options such as leather trim, a heater/demister and windscreen washer, the car's low roll-centre, due to the design of the VW suspension, dictated stiffer springing, making it enjoyable on a smooth circuit but jarring on poorly surfaced roads. However, being available in kit form, it neatly sidestepped the UK's hated Purchase Tax, making the car an appealing choice for impecunious weekend racers. It was priced in kit form from £660, equipped with the lowliest 35bhp, 1172cc Ford 100E engine. Also available were Coventry Climax's 1098cc FWA or 1216cc FWE engines, a Shorrock supercharger promoting the Ford motor to 56bhp, and the MGA's 1489cc unit.

Only 100 Mk1 Granturas are thought to have been produced before the Mk2 (represented by 'our' car) and 2A models appeared in 1960 and 1961 respectively. Visually identifiable by their extended tailfins, slightly flared rear wheelarches and front indicators mounted on the bonnet close to each headlight, the basic design and engineering remained as before. However, the default engines were now all from the MGA – displacing from 1489cc to 1622cc – with the Abingdon car's four-speed gearbox, or the option of 1216cc Climax power with a ZF gearbox, plus Morris Minor rack-and-pinion steering to replace the previous, 100E-based worm-and-peg set-up. The revised models also gained Austin-Healey 100 drum brakes all round, with the Mk2A receiving standard Girling front discs.

Despite a healthy demand for the Grantura, though, TVR was in a whirlwind of financial turmoil. Under pressure to increase production to two cars per month from the company's Hoo Hill factory, Trevor Wilkinson was forced



Minimal overhangs exacerbate the low-slung Grantura's compact profile. In period, it was an accessible and effective competition machine

From top: strakes above rear arches are a subtle concession to style; neat vent holes drilled in Perspex rear 'screen

to seek extra investment. Help came from a syndicate of TVR enthusiasts comprising Henry Moulds, David Scott-Moncrieff, Irving Harris, David Hosking and Frank Lambert, who joined Wilkinson to form Layton Sports Cars Ltd (the name was taken from the firm's then largest distributor, based in Cheshire). Nonetheless, the fact that the manufacturer's holding company changed twice more – first to TVR Cars Ltd, then Grantura Engineering – by 1963 should tell you all you need to know about the parlous state of TVR's management and finances in this tumultuous period. By 1962, Wilkinson had departed from the company he founded, frustrated that its ambitions had exceeded the fundamental ability to maintain a stable commercial platform.

Two years before this debacle, however, Wilkinson must have been buoyed by the plethora of successful club drivers in the UK flying the flag for the firm. Keith Aitchison, Peter Bolton and Colin Escott were among the most notable, mainly piloting Coventry Climax-powered Grantura Mk1s. Joining them for the 1960 season was Brighton garage proprietor Mary Wheeler, who caused quite a stir in her FWE-engined Mk1: she took the Ladies' Award at Firle Hill Climb in May and made her racing debut at Goodwood the following month, finishing third in a five-lap handicap event. Plenty more club drivers were joining the TVR fray, too, which might explain why the Blackpool folk hatched the audacious plan to enter Le Mans in 1961.

In preparation, four lightweight competition Granturas were put into production, each with a lighter yet stronger chassis, powered by the well-proven 1216cc Coventry-Climax engines working through close-ratio gearboxes, for entry in the Grand Touring 1300 class. The cars used thinner-gauge glassfibre bodies, with even the external doorhandles removed to save weight and the interior levers replaced by tiny pull-chains let into hand-stitched fabric door cards. Lightweight magnesium-alloy wheels replaced the Grantura's standard steel rims, and Alfin brake drums were fitted all round. The specification boasted all the ingredients for a successful Le Mans campaign, but so beleaguered were TVR's finances that not only was the entry canned, but the cars also had to be sold to help keep the company afloat.

The factory records from this period were destroyed in a fire many years ago, but it is believed that Grantura racers James Boothby (a London TVR dealer), Betty Haig, Colin Escott and Arnold Burton (of the famed tailoring family) purchased the cars direct from TVR. 'Our' car – chassis 7 C 238 – was the first of the four to be built and originally registered AUD 100 in October 1960. There is no certainty about which high-profile races it entered the following season, but the evidence suggests it became the Burton-sponsored car, driven by John Woolfe. If so, it would have raced in two of the most important sports-car events in 1961: Snetterton's Lombank Trophy on 25 March, and Goodwood's Fordwater Trophy on Easter Monday, 3 April, recording a DNF and an unknown result respectively.

The debate around the car's race provenance in this period stems from its identical twin – chassis 7 C 345, registered 126 RO – also having had the potential to compete in those races, with Woolfe driving. Even though 126 RO wasn't

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registered until four days after the Goodwood event, it was common for TVR and other manufacturers to enter cars wearing trade plates, which may have been the case here. With contemporary programmes not listing an entrant's registration, and the limited archive photography from both races giving nothing away, no one can state categorically whether 'our' car competed or not.

All the same, AUD 100 (as it was) enjoyed an active race career throughout the 1960s and into the '70s. In late 1961 it was sold to Michael Sargeant, who competed in national events. These included the BRSCC's British Sports Car Championship, with the car by then running an MGA engine with twin Weber 40 DCOEs, replacing its original Climax unit. At the end of 1964, William 'Bill' Cook bought the car and campaigned it in club events at Brands Hatch and Snetterton until 1971, after which it had some limited road use before being laid up. In 1996, when the Grantura was purchased by Jim Lowry, it had still only accrued 3500 miles.

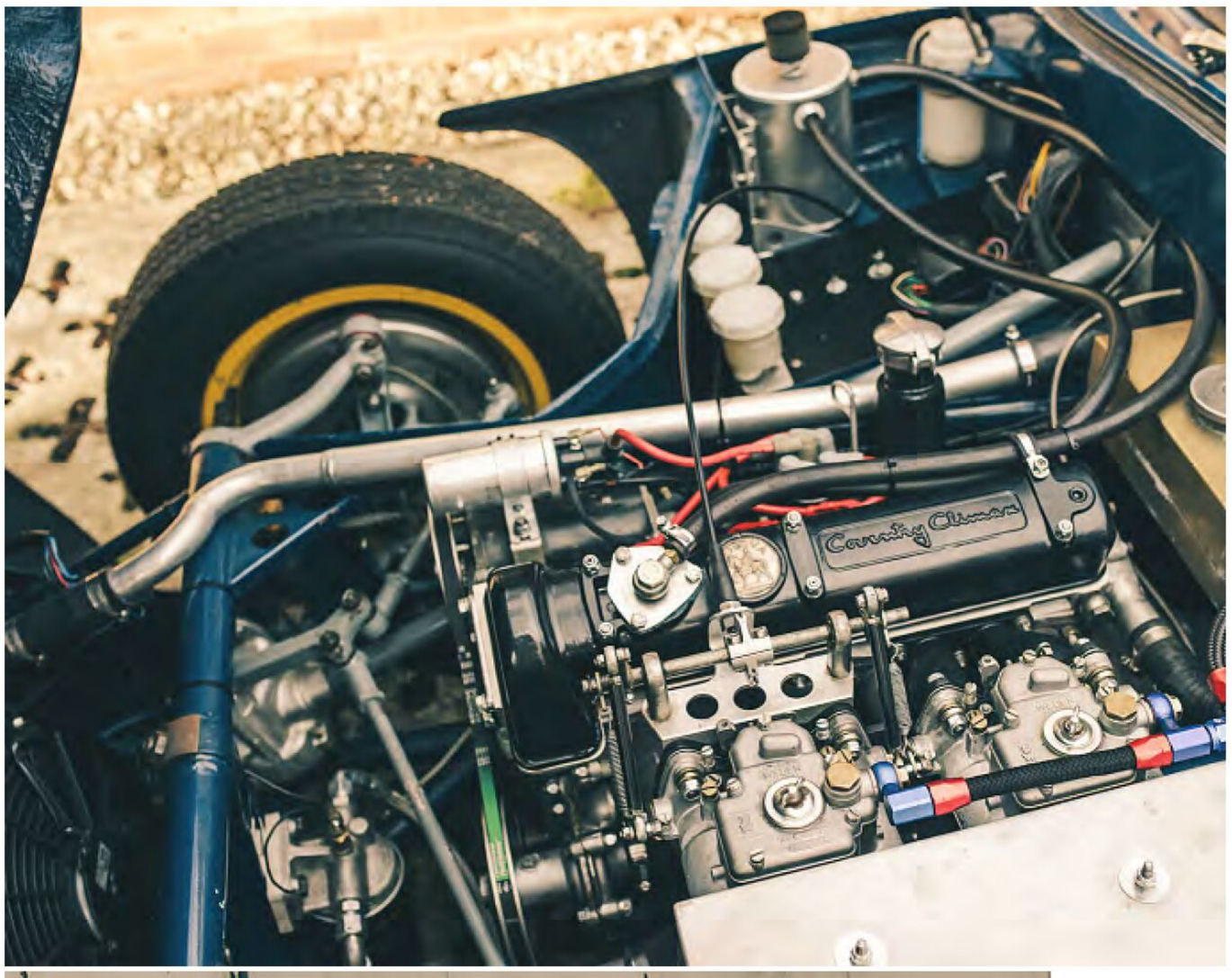
"It was so original – it hadn't been touched since 1971," Jim says. The car's registration was lost or sold at some point, so a new, period-correct number was acquired, which it wears today. Jim went on to purchase 126 RO – this car's original twin – and kept both together for a spell. It wasn't until 2013, though, that restorer Ivan Dutton acquired 7 C 238 from Jim and undertook a restoration back to its 1961 spec. The car then returned to competition, with entries across Europe in the Pre-64 GT Championship and a showing at Goodwood's Members' Meeting. Its current owner has taken up its racing mantle, as evidenced by the car's eligibility at FIA events until 2027.

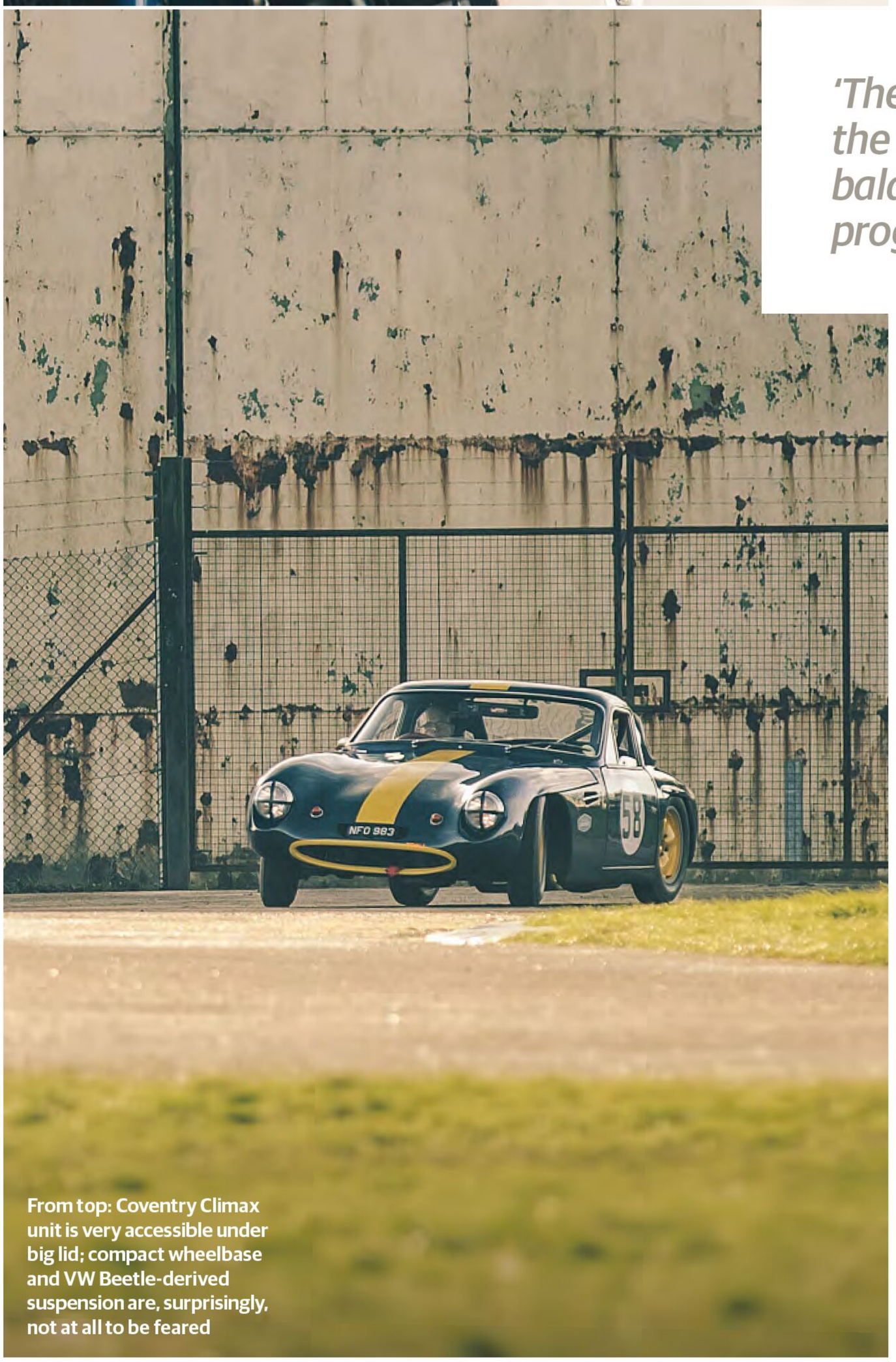
Hunkered down outside Pendine's offices at Bicester Motion, the Grantura looks small and brutish, the epitome of a purposeful '60s club racer. Zero overhangs front and rear, a subtly domed roof and the stubby rear wings, which carry the tail-lights and the pronounced alloy fuel filler, all create a highly functional whole, with the Jensen 541-like strakes over the rear wheelarch tops perhaps the only concession to styling. The lightweight 'wobbly web' wheels are shod with Dunlop Racing tyres, the sight of which, on this sharp, damp winter's morning, fills me with some trepidation. It is believed that Michael Sargeant, the car's second owner, added the yellow stripe over the dark blue coachwork, but either way its appearance – right down to the Perspex rear 'screen with its three vent holes – is just as it would have been in late 1961/early '62. Lift the front section to expose the Grantura's chassis, suspension and mechanicals, and its Climax FWE engine still appears tiny, even in such a small car, and slightly dwarfed by the generous twin Weber 40 DCOEs hanging off the side of it. But the motor sits nice and low in the chassis, and is Triumph Herald-like in terms of accessibility.

'Lift the front section and the Climax FWE engine appears tiny, even in such a small car, but it sits nice and low in the chassis'

TVR GRANTURA Mk2
(spec for standard production car)
Sold/number built 1960-'61/c400 (Mk2 & Mk2A)
Construction glassfibre body bonded to tubular backbone chassis
Engine all-alloy, sohc 1216cc 'four', twin Weber 40 DCOE carburettors
Max power 95bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque n/a
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by trailing arms, laminated transverse torsion bars, telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering worm and peg
Brakes Girling drums
Length 11ft 6in (3505mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1625mm)
Height 4ft (1219mm)
Wheelbase 7ft (2133mm)
Weight 1456lb (660kg)
0-60mph 10.8 secs (est)
Top speed 101mph (est) **Mpg** n/a
Price new £1045 (kit)

Weighing just 1456lb, the nimble Grantura makes the most of its rev-hungry 1.2-litre Climax engine's 95bhp





From top: Coventry Climax unit is very accessible under big lid; compact wheelbase and VW Beetle-derived suspension are, surprisingly, not at all to be feared

You enter the car by pulling down the driver's-side window from the outside (a little block attached to it enables this) and reaching inside for the tiny chain in the door casing. As always, being small aids entry into older sports cars, but even so, prising my 5ft 7in frame into the Grantura's necessarily modern Sparco race seat (the nicely patinated original passenger bucket has been retained) and between the bars of its full rollcage requires more agility than expected. Once you are strapped in with the Schroth six-point harness, you feel cocooned but comfortable. The small, three-spoke Mountney wheel facing you is curiously canted slightly to the side; behind it are a tachometer, redlined at 7800rpm, and a 120mph speedo. Five smaller dials form a neat row to the left, along with a haphazard line of push/pull knobs.

Having never driven a Grantura, I was a bit wary of its Beetle-derived suspension, ultra-short wheelbase and the Climax engine's appetite for revs. I needn't have been. As soon as you fire up and pull away – noting the clutch's high biting point and the notchy but precise gearshift – you can tell that it's going to be an absolute riot before you even reach the track. After a few warm-up laps on a – thankfully – drying circuit, you know for sure.

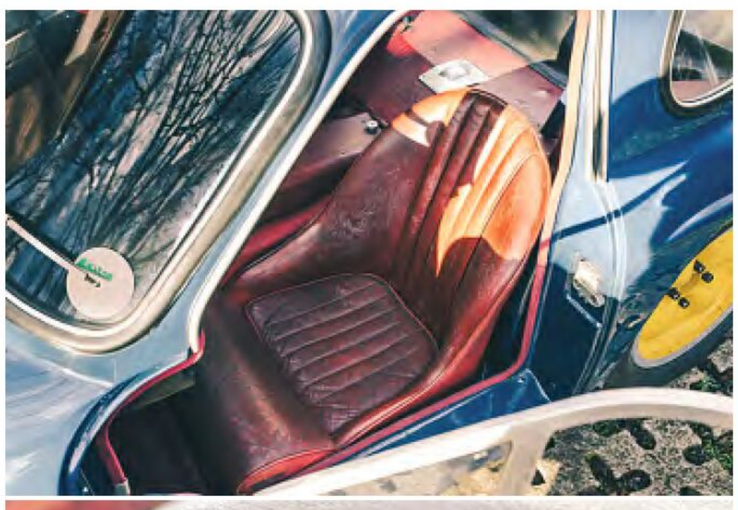
'There's a lovely transparency to the feedback, and the car is nicely balanced, rotating from the rear progressively and controllably'

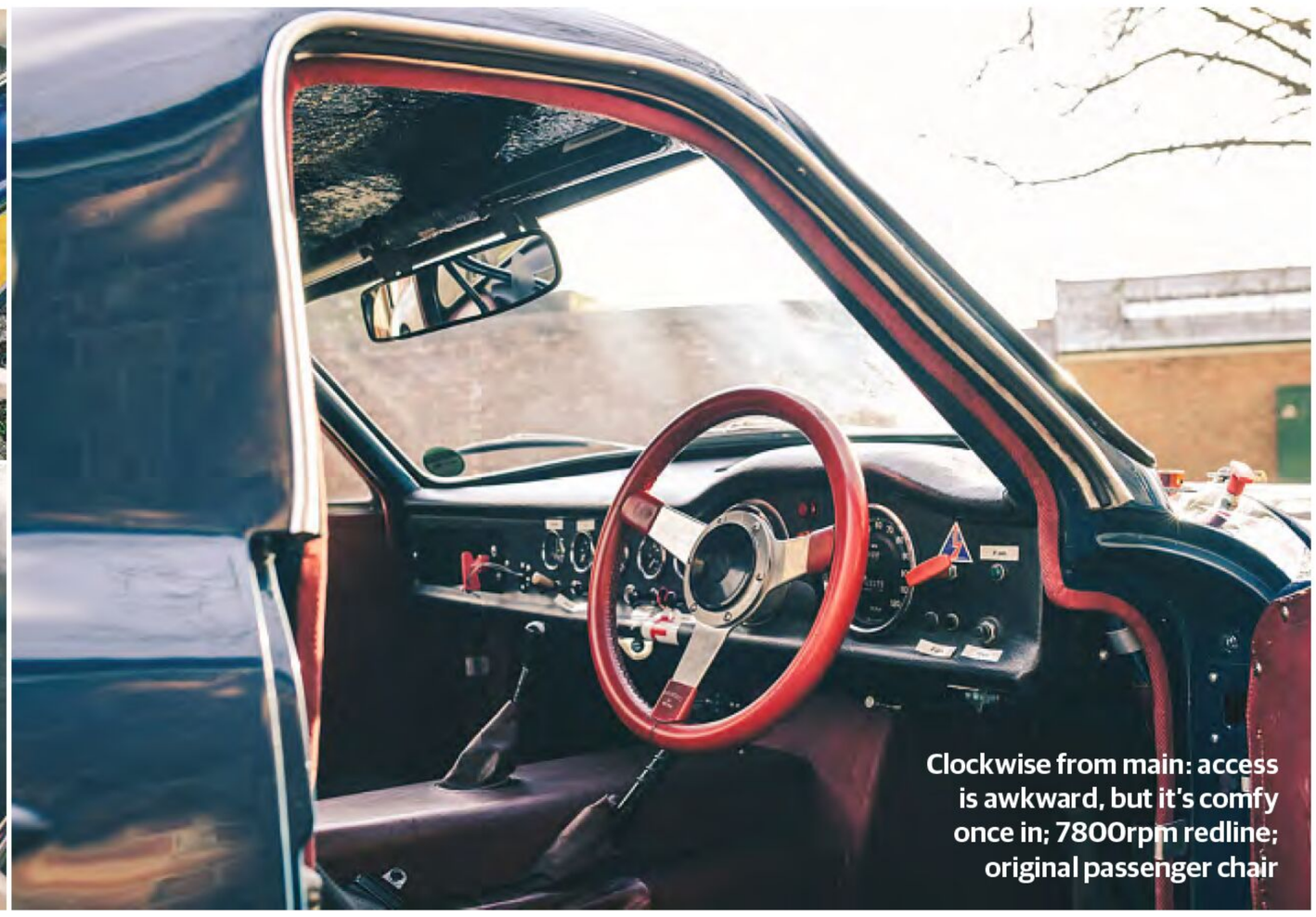
This Grantura's Climax, with its race cam, loves revs and is at its best over 4000rpm; keep it percolating above that and the car pings out of corners with real verve, but racing through ratios elicits crunches from the gearbox. It's not the sweetest-sounding motor, nor particularly refined, but its rumbustious nature suits the TVR to a tee. As does the handling. Weighing less than 1400lb in this spec, you'd expect the Grantura to feel light at the helm, and it does. But there's also a lovely transparency to the steering feedback, mixed with a high-ish ratio that doesn't leave you on tenterhooks every time you apply lock. When you do, though, the car feels nicely balanced, rotating from the rear so progressively and controllably that it goads you into unnecessary hoonery, just for the hell of it. Drive for speed, not drama, however, and the Grantura is neat and rewarding. Its limited-slip diff is quite severe, so a firm hand and a positive throttle input through bends are always needed, but overall the car inspires confidence, and you can see why in recent years it has been such an accomplished racer.

It's just a shame that, like so many other low-volume sports-car makers at the time, TVR was so poorly resourced that it could never take full advantage of the Grantura's competition prowess. The factory did, in '62, enter Le Mans, but the car retired after just three laps. It would be another 41 years before a TVR blasted down the Mulsanne Straight once again.

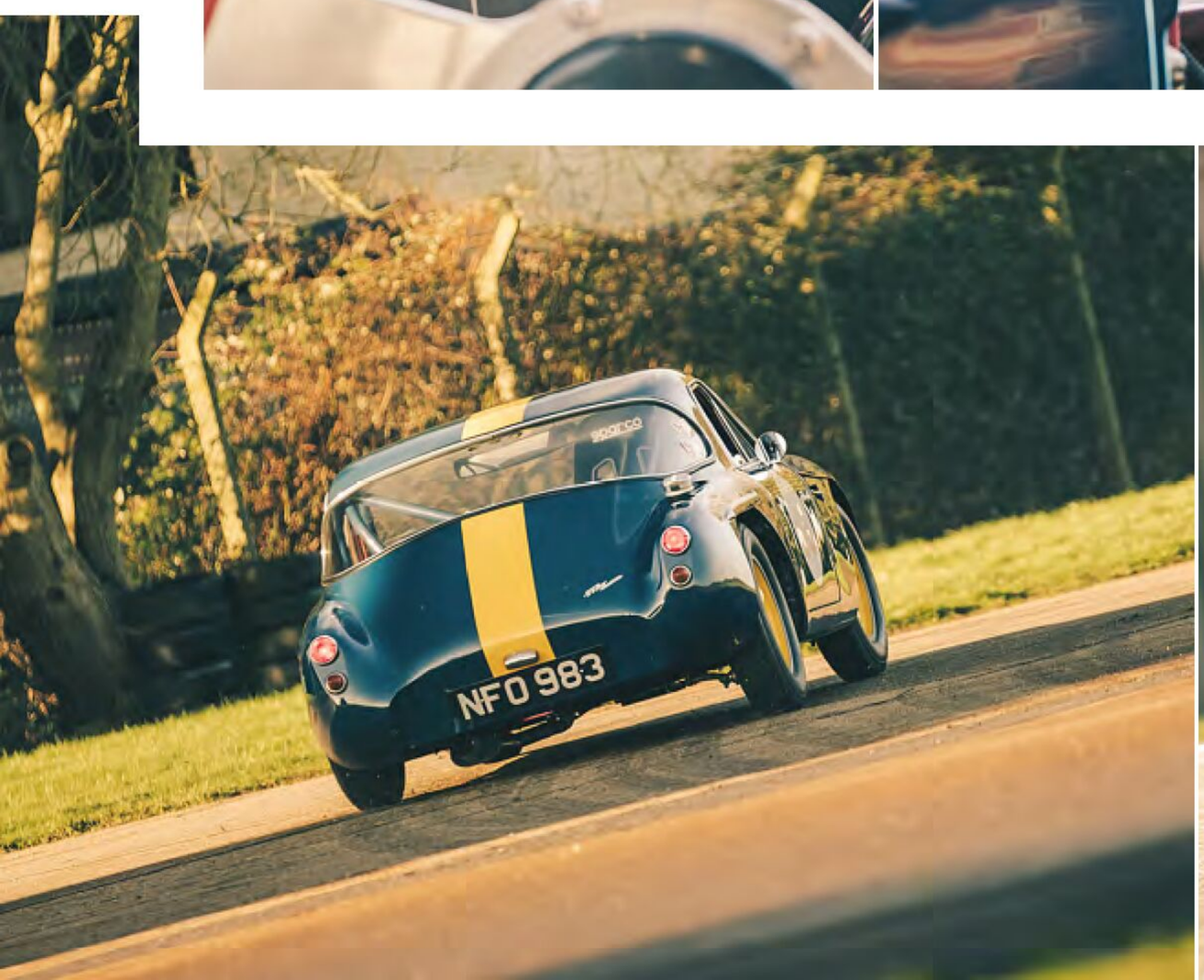
Thanks to *Pendine Historic Cars (pendine.com); Jim Lowry; Rob Pennington*

It's raucous and a little unrefined, but unrelenting fun to drive on a circuit

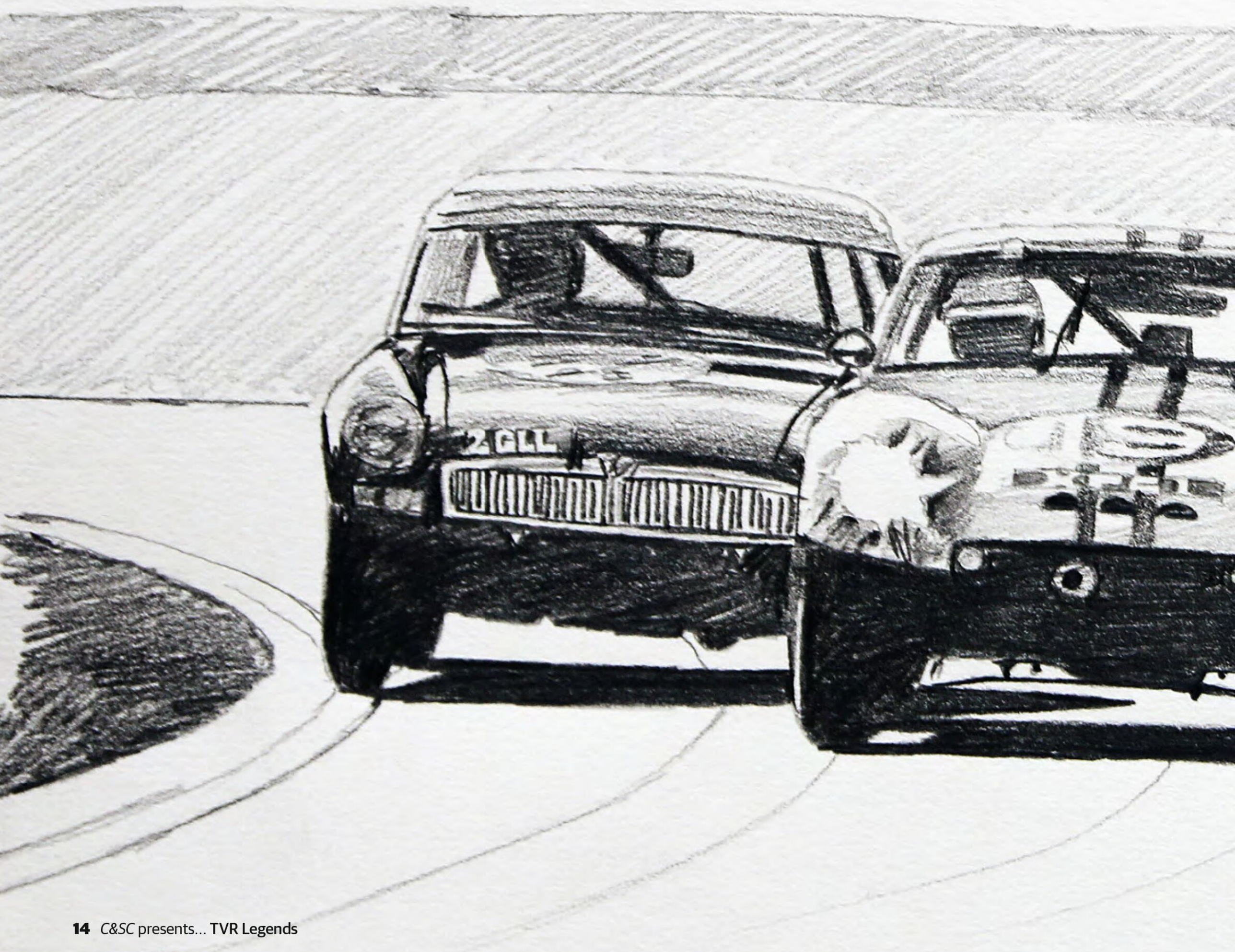




Clockwise from main: access is awkward, but it's comfy once in; 7800rpm redline; original passenger chair



From left: steering is light but full of feedback; the TVR has beautiful balance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THE ART OF THE PERFECT LINE

It was back to the drawing board for artist and TVR devotee Tim Layzell as he traded paintbrush for racesuit at Goodwood

WORDS **MICK WALSH**
IMAGES **JAMES MANN/TIM LAYZELL**

The TVR started from sixth spot on the grid

Artists who race are a relative rarity. The great Géo Ham tested Bugattis while seeking inspiration for his brilliant work, and Nick Faure was as good at cartooning as he was at competing in a vast range of machines, including his 11 attempts at Le Mans. Dexter Brown enthusiastically campaigned his hot XK120, a highlight being a trip to Ghent to follow in Norman Dewis' record-breaking tracks. Now Tim Layzell can proudly join that select set after an impressive debut in his TVR Grantura at the Goodwood Revival, finishing a hard-fought fifth in the Fordwater Trophy.

Tim's career has long mixed his passion for art with his automotive interests. He explains: "As a family, we've always had a thing about glassfibre sports cars. When I was young my dad owned a Gilbern GT; it was near concours, but he was devastated to discover the chassis was rusty, and he ended up making a new one. From an early age we learnt how to weld. While still at primary school my brother and I made our own pedal go-karts, and it always got very competitive. Dad would take us to Vintage Sports-Car Club meetings and ERA R4D was a favourite racer, so my go-kart had to be painted silver and black to match it. In later years we'd rent proper karts for a few races, which was great fun, but nothing went any further."

Childhood trips to Castle Combe provided inspiration, too, says Tim: "The charity events organised by *C&SC*'s Mike McCarthy for the Stroke Association were fantastic. To ride, aged 13, with Frank Sytner as he drifted a Jaguar D-type through Quarry was an unforgettable experience. 'Whizzo' Williams was another hero. Those were great days."

Tim has always enjoyed working on cars, which no doubt gives his painting an authentic dimension. "After I'd learnt to drive I bought a Midas kit car," he explains. "I rebuilt it and did a few local rallies with my brother. I also courted my wife in the Midas."

The glassfibre compulsion continued with the arrival of a blood-orange AC 3000ME. "With the Broadspeed Turbo specification, it had massive lag and wasn't really suitable for hillclimbing at Wiscombe," he remembers. "Eventually the engine blew up and it all turned into a nightmare." But the TVR bug had bitten back when he was 12 and his father bought a 1600M. "I recall being disappointed that he didn't buy a Vixen," says Tim. "Even then I knew they were lighter and faster."

As his automotive art career took off, Tim indulged in a series of Chimaeras. "I remember seeing one at the London Motor Show, and I fell in love with it," he recalls. "Fast and great looking, with a beautiful interior and that amazing exhaust, it had all the characteristics of the AC Cobra and Big Healey that I craved. I owned four: every time I sold one I regretted it and bought another." Over the years Tim also owned the 1968 Motor Show Vixen S2, which he used for hillclimbing; a Tuscan V6; and an outrageously fast T350C. "Our family appears to be addicted to TVRs," he smiles.

Promoting and selling his artwork at events became all-consuming, but when time allowed Tim would escape his stand and walk around. "I felt as if I was missing out," he admits. "The yearning to go racing never really left me. The Autumn Classic at Castle Combe is a local event, and in 2017 I went in convoy with my brother's TVR Griffith and our sons as passengers. We were walking through the wet paddock looking for chips when I spotted a white Grantura, XPG 1. At the back of my mind I'd been looking for a historic racer, and this looked so cool in American-style livery."

That evening, Tim started researching the history of the Grantura. "The story captivated me," he remembers. "Owner Phil Cooper had discovered it as a barn-find in the south of France. When he rang the TVR Car Club to check the chassis number, its amazing history came to light. I still have his original serviette with scribbled notes."

Ordered new by Wing Commander John 'Paddy' Gaston, it was prepared for racing with a lightweight chassis and body. Through the 1964 season, XPG 1 competed in all the major international sports car events, including the Spa 500km, Nürburgring 1000km and the Guards Trophy at Brands Hatch. "It even ran in the 2-litre GT support race at the Goodwood Tourist Trophy," says Tim. "Gaston finished fifth when Mike Spence won in the Chequered Flag Elan. I phoned TTP, the TVR specialist that had worked on my cars, and they said, 'If you want one, that's the best – it's up there with the Griffith prototype.' I had to buy it. I later

Clockwise from left: mechanical woes resolved; track knowledge helped Layzell prevail in the race-long battle for fifth; hot work in the driver's seat; it's a family affair for Team Layzell at the Goodwood Revival

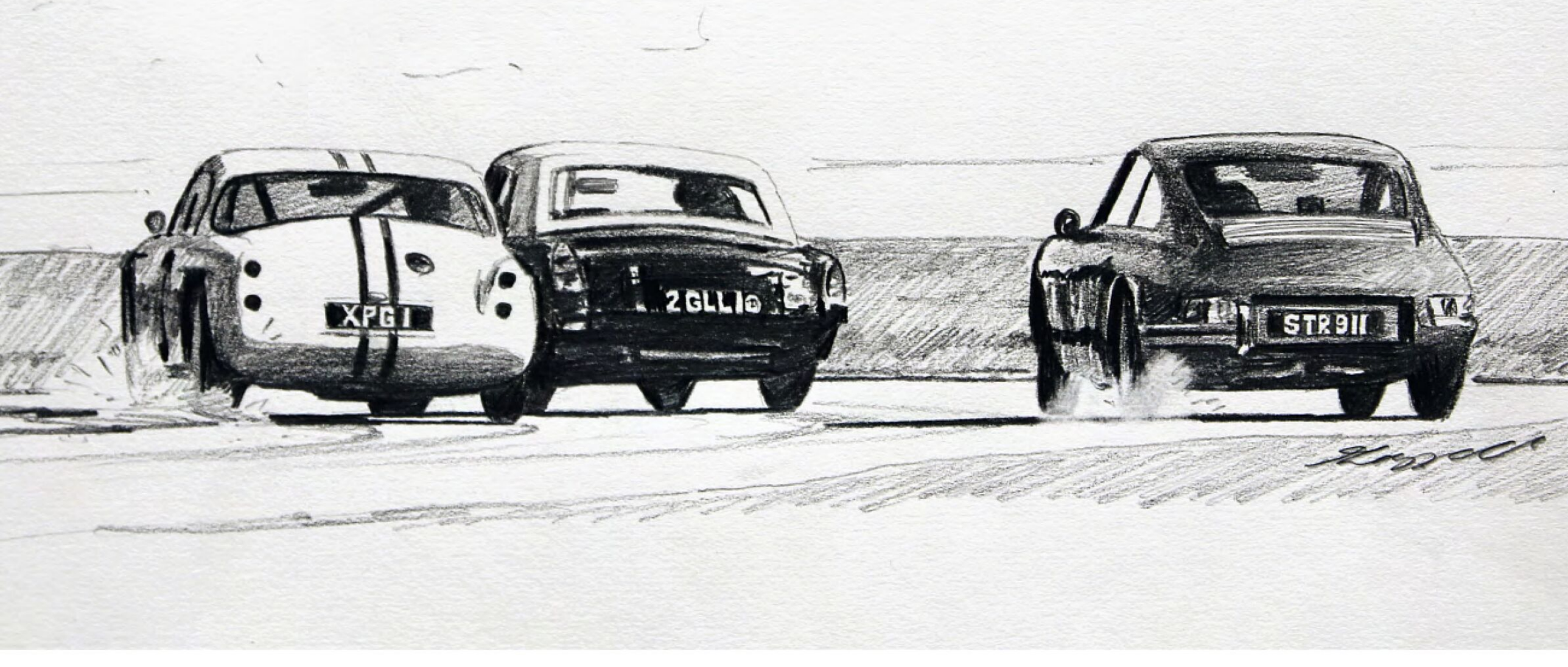
considered featuring the TVR in a painting commission of Daytona Cobras at Spa."

Even with the historic TVR in his garage, the hope of racing at the Goodwood Revival remained a dream. The Grantura is eligible for the Fordwater Trophy, but the GT race alternates between three different eras and 1960-'66 wasn't scheduled until 2019. As a result, it is always oversubscribed so he wasn't hopeful, even in a car with Goodwood history. Tim says: "The late commentator Henry Hope-Frost was a friend, and during conversation I mentioned I had bought the TVR. He kindly put me in touch with the Goodwood team, and I couldn't believe it when I was accepted. I wish he had seen the race, but I carried a 'Fever' sticker on the car in his memory."

With his entry confirmed, Tim started his preparation. "James Cameron at Mission Motorsport rented me his BMW 318 E30 for a few races," he explains. "With a 535 engine up front, it taught me a lot about car control. The Grantura had never had a passenger seat, but I fitted one so I could take my son out. At a track day Mark Hales came out for a ride and he was very complimentary. 'Don't touch the car' was his advice."

Extra preparation included an ARDS Advanced Course at Silverstone. "It was really useful," says Tim, "because the focus was balancing a car on and off the power, with an emphasis on tyre preservation." As the big day loomed, he booked a few test days at Goodwood, but track time was restricted by a gearbox problem: "We had just two weeks to go and TTP pulled out all the stops to get it

"With the TVR you have to carry speed, which is a challenge – get it right with a four-wheel drift and it's hugely rewarding"



Tim chases Mark Sumpter's Porsche, later retaking fifth with a move at Madgwick. Inset: grandfather Cyril (standing, second from right) with Halifax crew

done. Had it happened in qualifying at the Revival it would've been a disaster."

Back home, his family was getting ready, too. "My brother took on the role of team boss John Wyer, and the whole family came down to support me because we also had my stand to run," says Tim. "The Fordwater always attracts a fruity mix of cars, and it felt great to be lining up with two Abarths, an Alfa TZ and a Ferrari 275GTB. I remember thinking I'd be happy to qualify 20th, particularly against a grid of experienced regular racers. I knew my way around Goodwood and the car immediately felt good. With only 20 minutes, it was hard to find a gap for a clear lap: I got stuck behind an Iso Rivolta and couldn't touch it on the straights for power. After backing off, I managed two quick laps. Going down the Lavant Straight I glimpsed the screen and saw I was up to fifth, so I called it quits to save the car. We eventually dropped to sixth with a 1 min 35.7 secs best."

Happy, Tim then focused on his first-ever race start in the TVR: "Peter Bradfield was a good coach. His advice was to go up the inside and keep it clean for the first few laps."

Tim admits he didn't get much sleep thinking about the morning, with the Fordwater Trophy as Saturday's opening race. The day was blessed with glorious sunshine, and when the Union Flag dropped he made a demon start, almost passing Nick Swift's Mini Marcos. Mindful of cold tyres, however, he held back through Madgwick. "The TR4 went off while chasing the leaders through Fordwater," Tim says. "I was close behind and lifted, which let Harvey Stanley's MGB through." As the MG pulled clear, Tim was also overtaken by Mark Sumpter's Porsche 911 through Woodcote, and from there the two cars engaged in a race-long battle: "I had a massive, full-opposite-lock moment through Fordwater and backed off for a few laps. Telling myself to stay calm, I eventually caught Mark and made a move stick down the inside at Madgwick to retake fifth." Pumped up by this, Tim set his sights on reclaiming fourth: "I got Harvey at Madgwick but the move compromised my exit, and on the straight he was right behind me. Through 'No Name' he came alongside and I thought we were going to hit. I left the door open and ended up on the grass. After that I thought it better to ease off and fight another day. Mark and I both had our lights on through the traffic; he was much quicker, but I managed to hold him off."

Tim was rightly chuffed with fifth in a 26-car field on his Goodwood debut. "Friends used to joke about my TVR loyalty, but over the years I've only had one breakdown, an alternator failure," he explains. "Success at Goodwood vindicated those years of derision."

And Tim is full of admiration for the Grantura as a racer: "It's amazingly neutral and has incredible balance, as long as you keep it neat. What it lacks in power it makes up through the corners. Madgwick is daunting and needs a big gulp: the double-apex right goes on and on. With the TVR you have to carry speed, which is a real challenge; when you get it right with a four-wheel drift it's hugely rewarding. My family are regulars at Goodwood and we like to go out to Fordwater to watch. The high-speed spectacle through there down to 'No Name' and sliding through St Mary's takes my breath away – it's a view I've painted many times. This part underlines why this is a proper driver's track."

Weeks later, Tim is still buzzing from his Revival experience. "I've been very lucky in life with a cool job, a great wife and kids, but this was one of the best days ever," he says. "To have all of the family and my childhood friends watching made it even more special." And he has plans for next year: "I'd love to do the Le Mans Classic and run at Spa in the Equipe GTS race, but nothing will match this."

Tim's family links with Goodwood go back to before the track was created. "My grandfather was stationed at RAF Westhampnett in 1942 as an airframe fitter for Spitfires," he says. "For us, the first Revival was really special with Ray Hanna's epic flying display. I first exhibited at the Festival of Speed aged 15, and we've been to every Revival. It's a very special place."

For more of Tim's work, see timlayzell.com

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Picture a traditional TVR sports car. Brawny, powerful, lairy... and a little bit scary. Squat, purposeful, curvaceous... and gawky. A Cobra wannabe, but without the Thames Ditton snake's timeless lines. Let's face it, second-generation Griffith aside, Blackpool's sporadically successful maker of sports cars is not known for producing pretty machinery: who needs looks if you've got sufficient grunt? Which means that the market for its products has always been limited to committed enthusiasts rather than the mainstream.

This was particularly true in the company's formative years, when its cars were not so much styled as evolved – from a couple of Rochdale noses joined by a bit of resin and matting – and their chassis were designed more by angle grinder and welding torch than they were by pen and drawing board.

And then came the Trident. 'The most beautiful car in the world?' asked the *Daily Mail* after the Geneva Salon in 1965, as the first Trident coupé dropped into the collective consciousness like a bouncing bomb. By rights it really should have broken down the dam of conservatism that was holding back buyers. But, as is so often the case in the rollercoaster ride that is TVR's history, the creation of the car that could have saved the firm was the very thing that maimed it.

The most beautiful car in the world came about almost by accident. Although the idea of a more exotic, upmarket TVR had been mooted as early as 1961, the Trident ball didn't begin to roll until a year later when a young designer called Trevor Frost – working under his Italian mother's more exotic-sounding maiden name of Fiore – struck up a conversation with Grantura Engineering director Bernard Williams at the London Motor Show. Fiore was working with Torinese coachbuilder Fissore, and he had seen the ideal opportunity to recycle the abandoned Francesca Spyder he had styled for Lea-Francis back in 1960. At a second meeting in early 1963 – shortly after one of the marque's regular financial blips – he used the classic 'sketch on a napkin' trick, and the then TVR boss was hooked.

Incoming chairman Arnold Burton gave the Trident the green light in 1964. A year later Fissore had completed two prototypes, the first – and purest for designer Fiore, who saw Burton's practical revisions to gain cabin space as clumsy – going on show at Geneva in March. Following US importer Jack Griffith's assertion that the Trident must be V8-powered, the standard TVR chassis – used for everything

The Frost retort

Stylist Trevor Fiore (née Frost) tried to halt the trend for ugly TVRs with the razor-sharp Trident, which spawned this unique convertible

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS**
PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

from Griffith to 1800 – was stretched by 4½in to 7ft 6in, and the reliable and powerful 289cu in (4727cc) Ford pushrod unit was squeezed in.

The clamour for the new car surpassed expectations. Grantura Engineering claimed orders for around 50 cars (worth £150,000) at the show alone and, with production planned for three months' time, two more prototypes were ordered, the second in response to Jack Griffith's other stipulation: there must be a convertible. But Griffith played a big part in the failure of the very car he pushed for. After relations soured with the Hoo Hill factory, he cancelled his Trident order. Then came a dock strike in the USA, leaving a batch of Griffiths – sales of which could have gone some way to recouping the Trident's reputed £30,000 development costs – stranded on the wrong side of the Atlantic. Not for the first time, TVR – or Grantura Engineering as it was then – was swamped by its growing financial insecurity. The Tridents' future looked uncertain, with one car already shipped off to the USA and two dormant, unfinished, in Turin.

"There are all sorts of stories about the Trident," says Martin Lilley. Then a 23-year-old, Griffith-owning TVR dealer, Martin stepped into the breach with his father and financial backer Arthur to revive the firm as TVR Engineering. Both believed the gorgeous Trident project was part of the package, Martin says: "When Grantura Engineering was in liquidation, [Suffolk TVR dealer] Bill Last got involved and had a car made at Fissore on an Austin-Healey chassis. It was just like the Trident, but different. We didn't know anything about it until the car appeared at the Racing Car Show in 1966. By then we'd got our own Tridents from Fissore, where they were under the illusion Last was there on behalf of TVR. It was all a bit underhand. There was a discussion with Bill about us making the Trident for him. I thought about it for a day, but couldn't see it working – especially not with him."

Who really owned the rights to the Trident design remains in dispute, but Fiore and Fissore could hardly be blamed. After all, they were never paid properly for their original work by the ailing Grantura Engineering. Yet one thing is for certain: Last's Trident trio – the potent V8 Clipper, the V6 Venturer and the straight-six Tycoon that followed it – killed off the TVR version for good. Says Martin: "It was a confusing time, and there were lots of problems. The Trident was one problem that we didn't need to have, so we got on with TVR as it was." Which makes the fact that Last only managed to build 130 of them over the ensuing decade even more galling. Worse was to come for Martin, who had to watch the glassfibre

Sharp wedge shape works best in profile

bodies for Last's cars rolling out of the next-door unit, where TVR's sister firm and body supplier Grantura Plastics resided.

Undaunted, the Lilleys revised and relaunched the TVR 1800S and fetched their two unfinished Tridents from Turin. The convertible was then completed for Martin to use. "My car was part of the assets of Grantura Engineering," he explains. "We got a red coupé and my gold convertible. It was a very light colour, but then Fiore took it back to Italy in 1966 and spent a long time away with it, the cheeky bugger! He repainted it tangerine orange and added a strip with holes drilled in it beneath the back to hide the chassis. He then disappeared off to Spain in it – I think he had a friend down in the Benidorm area. Eventually it came back – a bit worn out!"

Martin then used the car for a few years before selling it on. Following a period in the USA, the unique convertible underwent a meticulous restoration with TVR enthusiast Neil Lefley in the late 1990s, during which time it was repainted the rather more flattering shade of metallic ice blue that you see here. And it looks fantastic.

At a casual glance, a TVR Trident and a Bill Last Trident could be one and the same, but it's in the details where the purer original and its uglified, compromised evolution diverge. For Last's car, Fiore had to modify the shape to fit over the longer, chunkier Healey box-section chassis. That accounts for his car's taller, slabbier sides and the unappealing bend to the immaculate shoulder line of the original. Clumsy side vents, chubbier bumpers and incongruous round headlights that took a bite out of the front panel were also unfortunate additions. "The [Bill Last] Trident was quite different," says Martin. "The detailing wasn't so good and the inside was rubbish. The original design was beautiful, but the front of this one was really rather boring."

Martin's convertible is perhaps not quite as well balanced as its coupé sibling, but it has the same exceptionally crisp finish: the inset, chrome-finned side vents, deep sills, wonderful origami bumpers and immaculate indents that surround the badges and lights. The later Cibié driving lights do it no favours, because its sharp lines are otherwise uncluttered. The doorhandles are little more than thumb hooks with barrel locks, while the fuel filler is concealed, Mustang-style, behind the rear numberplate and the headlights are hidden away in rather natty rotating pods.

If you have ever sat in an early TVR – even a long-wheelbase – you'll be amazed at how much space there is inside the Trident. Except in the offset footwell, where it comes as a relief to find there are only two pedals following the current Belgian owner's decision to swap the clunky original Borg-Warner T-10 manual for a period three-speed automatic. He also added power steering for good measure. A travesty? Not likely: slide on to the broad, comfortable seat – whose finish is clearly more Turin than Blackpool – and this car feels worlds away from its raucous Griffith sibling. The modifications feel so appropriate that it seems inevitable they would have found their way on to the options list, had the Trident reached the market.

Prototype hints remain – wipers that don't park properly, Dymo labels atop the toggle

From top: side vents are beautifully executed; neat quarter-bumpers; pop-up lights rotate

switches on the wide, vinyl-trimmed centre console – but it's an impressively complete car. It's elegant in the not-quite-finished vein of a Gordon-Keeble rather than a decades-of-history Aston cabin, but elegant nonetheless.

TVR would later become synonymous with drop-tops, but when the Trident appeared the firm had never built one aside from founder Trevor Wilkinson's first Specials, and its first production roadster, the 3000S, was 13 years away. So having the wind through his hair would have been a genuine novelty for Martin when he got the car going after retrieving it from Italy. But, despite the loss of the roof, the Trident doesn't lack refinement. The relatively tall 'screen works stylistically and provides a sheltered cabin; the hood is easy to use and fits superbly. Only the lack of sound-deadening and the odd rattle from the huge clamshell bonnet spoil the sense of creak-free solidity.

The combination of Martin's decision to fit a standard 195bhp V8 – rather than the 271bhp 'Hi-po' unit Tridents were slated to use – and the prototype's 2240lb weight (with a steel body and alloy panels it was 390lb heavier than the glassfibre Griffith), plus that auto 'box mean the convertible isn't going to win any drag races. But once rolling the Trident is swift – reputedly with 140mph potential – and it's easy to imagine how outrageous the lighter, more powerful production car would have been. The brakes – a Tuscan disc/drum set-up here – feel well short of convincing. But customer Tridents were to use Girling discs all round, and glitches such as the tyres rubbing on the wheelarches on full lock and the heat soak into the footwells would have been ironed out in the process.

As for the chassis, with double wishbones all round it was quite up to the task. In fact, it feels both friendlier and more sophisticated than the Griffith, despite being essentially the same. "It used a longer version of the standard chassis," explains Martin. "The same one that was used for the S2 Vixen and Tuscan V6, but with different springs and dampers. It was smoother-riding, but that was because it was heavy. It was more a relaxing cruiser than an out-and-out sports car."

It would be naïve to suggest that the Oliver Winterbottom-styled Tasmin, launched more than a decade after the Trident's demise, was Martin completing unfinished business, but it is ironic that by the time the Tasmin reached production the 'wedge' style was already looking dated, while the Trident would have been at the forefront of the new wave.

The benefit of distance has damped Martin's anger, and today he is philosophical about the Trident, saying: "We should have done it, but it's just one of those things. At that stage we didn't have the money to build it so we stuck with the 1800S. It would have been nice if we could have built it as a TVR; it would have been quite a different ballgame." And how. It is impossible to know how TVR's fortunes would have turned out had the Trident reached production, but it's certain that it would have matured into a more rounded car maker, one capable of more than the overpowered, under-engineered white-knuckle rides for which it will be remembered. Just as the Cobra evolved into the sophisticate AC 428, a swift, elegant GT born of a blood-and-guts racer for the road, so its on-track rival the Griffith could – and should – have spawned the Trident. Like the AC, it will go down in history as one of the car industry's great missed opportunities. CLASSIC

Cancelled Francesca Spyder donated its lines

Thanks to *David Gerald TVR Sportscars (01527 525319; dgsportscars.com)*

Clockwise: Dymo labels betray prototype origins, but tan trim has made way for blue; elegant script; Ford motor has 195bhp

THE TINA ARENA

Although relatively unsung, Trevor Fiore was a big hitter in the realm of '60s British low-volume sports cars. "I first got to know about Frost when I was at Chelsea College [of Art & Design]," says Martin Lilley. "He was doing the Elva [GT160] and I was a mad enthusiast – I had been building cars since I was 16." Fiore also designed the Bond Equipe 2-litre, and the Trident wasn't his only project for TVR. In 1965, Martin asked Fiore to come up with a Hillman Imp Sport-based baby 2+2. "I went out to Fissore for a fair bit of time, designing it from scratch," he says. "Trevor was a good body designer, but he didn't do chassis design at all."

It was built by Fissore and named Tina after the daughter of Gerry Marshall, Martin's friend and colleague – he ran Lilly's Barnet Motor Co when Martin went to save TVR. A convertible was unveiled at the 1966 Turin Salon, joined by a pretty coupé (above) for the London Motor Show later in the year. Strong interest prompted the Hoo Hill works to announce the car would go on sale in early 1968. But even with glassfibre bodies instead of the prototypes' steel, the volumes required to make a profit were beyond the factory's capabilities. "We were trying to get a tie-up with Rootes and Jensen," explains Martin, "but the figures didn't add up. So it was back to the old, 'genuine' TVRs."

TOP TEN

ONE-OFF TVRS

An enviable roster of beautiful bruisers emerged from Britain's most characterful car maker, but not all made the grade. Here's a peek at the cutting-room floor...

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY ***C&SC*/NEWSPRESS/TVR CAR CLUB**

TVR returned to great fanfare at the Goodwood Revival in 2017, with the event's Earls Court Motor Show display given over to a celebration of the marque. Cynics may speculate that the all-new Griffith, which provided the centrepiece, could itself remain a one-off, with customers yet to take delivery of the Cosworth V8-powered coupé. If it does, however, it will be in excellent company. The eventful history of the charismatic sports car maker is peppered with blind alleys, *culs de sac* and – being less charitable – some absolute munters that were never likely to win over an audience that was used to cars that blended aggression and beauty in equal measure.

But that should come as no surprise, because for a low-volume manufacturer working with a separate tubular chassis and a glassfibre body, just about every car you make has the potential to be unique. Certainly in the early days every car was different, before the TVR template was set with the original Grantura, which provided the family look right through to the dawn of the 'wedge' at the start of the '80s.

With that in mind, it's almost impossible to narrow down the list to just 10, but this is a selection of our favourite weird and wonderful one-offs from the Blackpool back catalogue.

1 1965 TVR Trident Convertible

Perhaps TVR's greatest missed opportunity, the fabulous Trident moved the company away from its famous style – formed by a pair of Rochdale bonnets – and into the world of sophisticated GTs, with an angular shape that predated the Tasmin by more than a decade. Four were produced, but just one of them was a convertible – a must for the US market, which also demanded the 289cu in Ford V8 squeezed beneath the long, tapering bonnet.

The styling was by Trevor Frost – working under his Italian mother's maiden name, Fiore – with the steel bodies made by Turin coachbuilder Fissore. Orders worth £150k were taken at its 1965 Geneva debut, but the model slipped through the cracks in one of the firm's regular changes of ownership, and was hijacked by Suffolk TVR dealer Bill Last. New owner Martin Lilley watched on as Last's Trident Car Co built c130 Clippers, Venturers and Tycoons on Austin-Healey and Triumph chassis – but at least Lilley got the lovely prototype as a company car.

Anorak fact *In the ultimate irony, glassfibre bodies for the Trident emerged from Grantura Plastics – TVR's next-door neighbour*

2 1966 TVR Tina

Trevor Frost must have got a taste for TVR after the Trident (below left), because just a year later came the pretty Tina. This time, however, there was no V8 power or tubular chassis, with the tiny 2+2 (and its convertible twin) sitting on a Hillman Imp Sport floorpan, powered by a rear-mounted 875cc 'four'. Again built at Fissore, with hands-on input from TVR co-owner Martin Lilley, the steel-bodied sports car was called Tina – a name shared by the newborn daughter of Lilley's friend and TVR racer/dealer Gerry Marshall – and revealed in open form at the Turin Salon in 1966, with the coupé following in London later in the year. Sadly, TVR couldn't build production models in the volume required to make them profitable, even in glassfibre, and the project died despite a universally positive response. Happily, both of the prototypes survive.

Anorak fact *Gerry Marshall acquired the coupé in 1989 with the intention of restoring it, but never had time and in 2005 it passed to its namesake Tina, who returned it to its former glory*

3 1971 SM TVR Zante

Perhaps the best known of all stillborn TVRs achieved notoriety first for being part of the infamous Earls Court show display featuring models Susan Shaw and Helen Jones in their birthday suits, and then for being dumped unceremoniously in the Blackpool factory's 'graveyard' when it was no longer needed. Martin Lilley's second foray into 'wedge' territory was styled by Harris Mann, the father of the TR7, its shooting brake style following the lead of the Reliant Scimitar GTE and made by Specialised Mouldings Ltd in Cambridgeshire – hence 'SM'. An attempt to extend the range with an upmarket, modern GT, it was stymied by sitting on an aged Vixen 2500 chassis with Triumph 2.5-litre power. A poor reception in the critical US market sounded its death knell as the focus switched to the crucial new M-Series that was launched alongside it.

Anorak fact *Sid James and Barbara Windsor reputedly tried to order an SM at the show, to be used as a fundraiser for the Variety Club*

4 '67 Grantura Gem

The products of the Hoo Hill industrial estate were not always known for being pretty, but the Gem that emerged from TVR's sister firm (and neighbour) Grantura Plastics was particularly, er, 'distinctive'... It's not strictly a true TVR, then, but the company was descended from Trevor Wilkinson's original operation, staffed by former TVR employees, and was then still producing all of TVR's bodies. Add in the fact that it was run by businessman, racing driver and TVR Car Club president Tommy Entwistle and it deserves a place on our list, even if TVR decided that its blunt-nosed lines meant that it didn't deserve a place in its model line-up. Still, the Gem had its qualities – not least a roomier cabin and a proper opening bootlid – and continued to be developed and raced by Entwistle for over five decades.

Anorak fact *The Gem's long-wheelbase Tuscan chassis wore glassfibre panels, made in moulds taken from a hand-formed aluminium plug*

5 1982 TVR Tasmin Turbo

Martin Lilley finally achieved his 'wedge' ambitions with the launch of the Tasmin in 1980, but surely even he could have never imagined the number and variety of versions it would spawn over the following decade and more. In fact, it took the enthusiastic attentions of incoming TVR boss Peter Wheeler to truly release the model's potential with a series of ever more extreme, Rover V8-powered models.

Before all of that, however, came the Tasmin Turbo, first seen as a convertible in 1981 then in definitive coupé form at the October 1982 Motor Show. With a turbocharged version of the standard Tasmin's Ford 2.8-litre Cologne V6 beneath its heavily reworked bodywork, it made nearly 50% more power: a heady 228bhp at 5600rpm and 249lb ft of torque.

Anorak fact *The Tasmin wasn't the only unique turbocharged model: Lilley owned a one-off 'SE' version of the 3000S Turbo convertible*

6 1988 'White Elephant'

Having started its Blackpool life in standard 3.5-litre, 190bhp form, the Rover V8 grew into ever more extreme incarnations as the 1980s progressed. As it got more powerful, however, strict emissions regulations became tougher to meet, so TVR began looking for a replacement. A potential answer came from the unlikely source of Australia, in GM-Holden's aluminium 5-litre V8 – supplied by Tom Walkinshaw, whose TWR team was building Commodore racers for the Aussie manufacturer. The 440bhp HSV unit was mated to a Borg-Warner T5 'box and fitted into a special car built to Wheeler's personal spec.

The starting point was a 420SEAC chassis, while a 350i coupé body was updated with muscular flared arches and integrated headlamps behind Perspex covers. When it was found that the Rover unit could be made to meet emissions targets after all, however, the Holden V8 was abandoned. Wheeler used the car himself for two years to go shooting before it became a factory hack then, like the Zante, it ended up sitting abandoned behind the works. Eventually sold, this unique piece of TVR history has now been fully restored.

Anorak fact *Wheeler specified a bespoke hidden compartment for his guns, plus a special carpeted cubby behind the seats for his dog, Ned*

7 1986 TVR 420 Sports Saloon

The idea of a more practical TVR was hardly a new one – after all, the Sports Saloon revived the name of one of Trevor Wilkinson's earliest models, and the Tasmin was available as a 2+2 model from soon after its launch (albeit with room only for very small children). With the 420 Sports Saloon, however, TVR attempted to make it a practical proposition for adult rear passengers, with self-levelling rear suspension for the chassis (sourced from a 420SEAC) and an ungainly roofline to boost headroom. The shape was claimed to be all-new, but was clearly Tasmin-based, as if a 350i had reversed at high speed into a MkV Cortina. Despite the promise of its 265bhp V8, visitors to the October Motor Show were not impressed and the project was canned, with the body eventually being cut up – later donating its nose to the 'White Elephant'.

Boss Peter Wheeler didn't abandon the 2+2 idea completely, however, and it would subsequently reappear a decade later in the hugely successful Cerbera.

Anorak fact *As well as 47 2.8-litre V6-engined Tasmin +2s, TVR also built six +2 coupé versions of the V8-powered 350i*

8 1989/1990 TVR Speed Eight

Rather than spend money it didn't have developing cars that people didn't want to buy, TVR used a 'suck it and see' approach: make a prototype, then build it if buyers like it. The Speed Eight was a perfect example: first shown at the 1989 London Motorfair as a slightly soft-edged, longer-wheelbase, two-seater replacement for the 'wedge' (above), it returned a year later at the NEC longer still, curvier still, and by then with 2+2 seating (below) – a first for a TVR drop-top. This rapid change was made possible by the modelling method pioneered on the 'White Elephant': the body was sprayed with expanding foam, which was then carved to shape and coated with a layer of glassfibre. Sadly for the Speed Eight, however, the Griffith was also given its debut at the 1990 event, and comprehensively stole the limelight. The prototype went into storage, before eventually being destroyed.

Anorak fact *The 1989 car had a 225bhp version of the 3.9-litre Rover V8; in 1990, it was offered with a 240bhp 3.9 or a 286bhp 4.3*

9 1987 TVR Evolution S

The S-series was launched in 1986 as the new entry-level TVR model, giving a lower price point for the marque while the wedge moved progressively upmarket. But just a year later, TVR hinted at the new model following its angular sibling's lead with the 'Evolution S', unveiled at the 1987 London Motorfair.

It was still to be offered with V6 power like its lowlier incarnation – except that the show car actually had no motor, while TVR tried to decide whether to use a Swaymar-built, 3.2-litre version of the Ford unit, or to re-engineer the car to take a 'completely new 3.3-litre V6' – later revealed to be from Holden. The body received a front-end restyle with large driving lights that previewed the look of the production V8S, and there were fat split-rim alloys, a limited-slip diff and tweaked front and rear suspension, while inside there was a full walnut-veneered dash.

Anorak fact *A 2-litre Cosworth version of the S was also reportedly built, boasting a slightly terrifying 350bhp and a five-speed transaxle*

10 1996 TVR Griffith Speed Six

A true missing link, the Griffith Speed Six prototype bridged the first curvy TVRs of the 1990s with the wilder creations that would take the firm into the new millennium. It was also the first appearance of the company's all-new straight-six engine, hot on the heels of its monster V8, which made its debut in the Cerbera.

Revealed at the NEC show in 1996, the Speed Six show car was sitting on a stock Griffith chassis, but with a radically reworked interior and lightly tweaked bodywork. The faired-in headlights now incorporated the indicators, and there were some distinctive new high-level tail-lights. The all-alloy, twin-cam straight-six was to be available in 330bhp 3.2-litre or 380bhp 4-litre forms, but when the car reappeared at Earls Court a year later as the Tuscan Speed Six – with further body mods and a new chassis – it had the 360bhp 4-litre that production Tuscans would eventually use.

Anorak fact *In November 1994, a Griffith was also fitted with the AJP V8 engine – the unit's name taken from the initials of the men behind the modular engine programme: Al Melling, John Ravenscroft and Peter Wheeler*

ASHES *to* ASHES

A young Martin Lilley twice brought TVR back from the brink. Does the brand's most charismatic leader believe the phoenix can rise again?

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE**
PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

If Martin Lilley had been looking to kill a few hours, our arrival has clearly murdered them. Hospitable, smiling even, he's still at a loss wondering why everyone suddenly wants a word. It's not so much that he's reluctant to talk, more that he's disinclined to be a 'rent-a-gob' commenting on the current state of TVR, a marque he once brought back from the dead. "Everyone keeps asking me about TVR," he protests. "Is someone going to revive it? Do I know if Bertone will build the cars? What's happened to the Russian [Nikolai Smolenski, the marque's most recent keeper]? How would I know? I've been out of the game for the past 26 years."

The sense of frustration is palpable – the first sight of a Dictaphone is met with "I hate those bloody things" – and the line of questioning is predictable, but the parallels are obvious. Like Smolenski, Martin became the custodian of TVR in his 20s and similarly toyed with having cars built in Italy – a few prototypes were assembled there during his tenure. The major difference is that one of them kept the firm afloat for 16 years.

Martin Lilley reflects outside the now-defunct TVR factory in Blackpool. Left: Martin's own Tuscan (note registration number) is road tested by *Motor* in 1967

Not that becoming a motoring mogul represented a life goal for Martin. "Well, I've always liked making things," he ponders, momentarily distracted by a box of children's building bricks. "I suppose I was about 14 when I developed an interest in cars. I started reading all the magazines and got hooked. I then bought and stripped down a pre-war Ford 10 and put an Ashley body on it. I was, what, 15 when I started it, and old enough to drive by the time I had finished. A bright-red sports car was quite something for a teenager to have in 1958."

Fast-forward to the early 1960s and Martin was (ostensibly) swotting up on vehicle engineering in Chelsea. "You can imagine what the place was like back then," he chuckles. "I suppose I acted the playboy, but I did work hard, too. As well as my studying, I was trading cars and had a sideline building Lotus Elans. At that time there was 66% Purchase Tax on new cars, so you could avoid around £600 by buying an Elan in kit form. I would do one in a weekend and charge a third of that. Anyway, I went from various Lotus Sevens and my own Elan to an AC Ace, then an E-type with a D-type head."

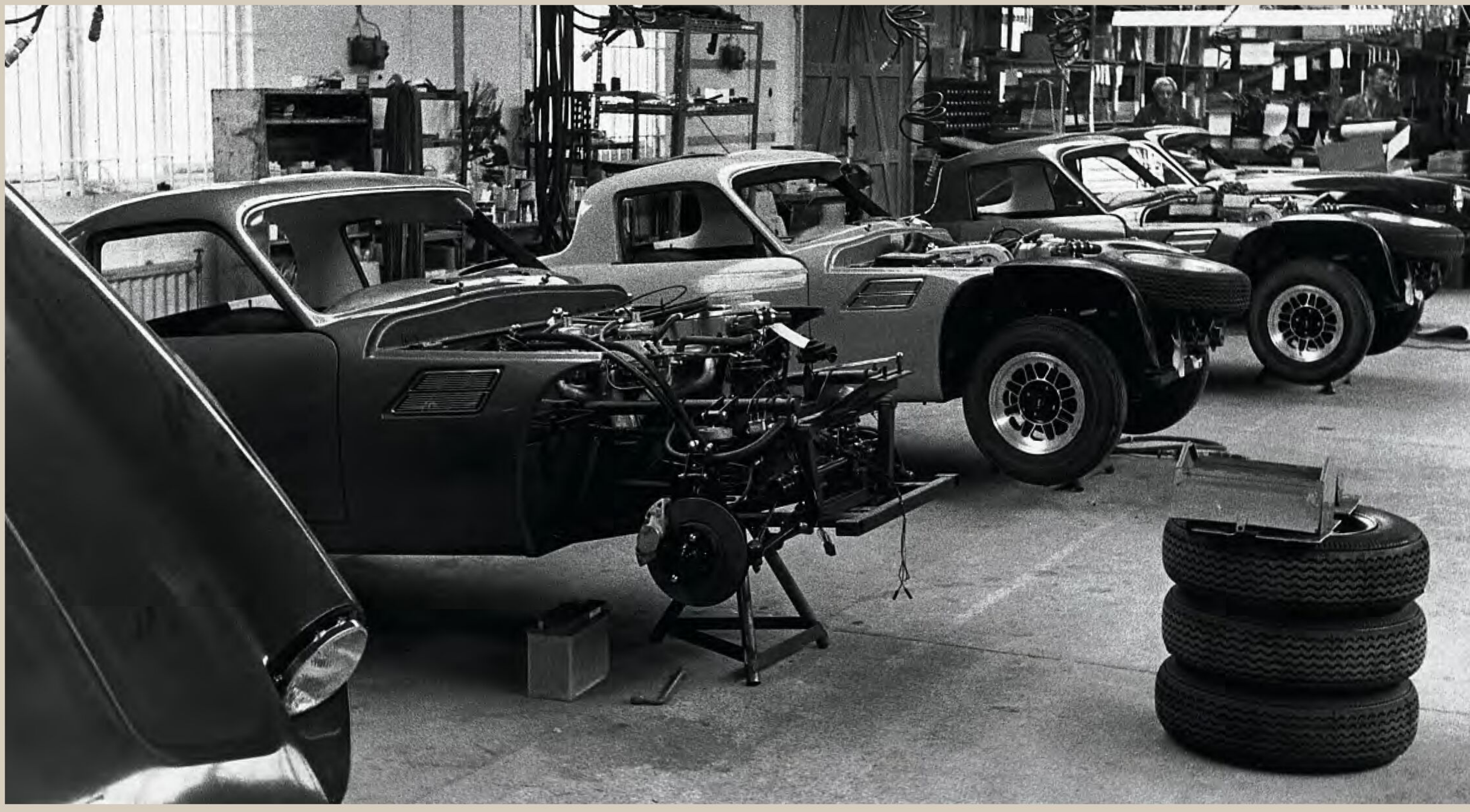
Then came TVRs. "I'd never been interested in them before – I thought the Grantura was crude," he recalls. "But it came about that an American [Jack Griffith] had started putting Ford V8s in them, and I had a go in the first one over here. It was incredibly quick so I bought a Griffith and went racing, usually with my old mate Gerry [Marshall]. The stub-axles had a tendency to break and we'd lose a wheel or two, so it went back to the factory in Blackpool to be repaired. A buddy of Arnold Burton who owned TVR, or Grantura Engineering as it was called then, had shares in the business, and we – my father and I – decided to buy them as an investment. Then, lo and behold, Grantura Engineering went into voluntary liquidation."

Smiling, but no longer speaking, Martin stares into his cuppa for some inspiration. After the mother of all pregnant pauses, he allows himself a titter: "We must have been mad." In November 1965, Martin took control of the freshly re-minted TVR Engineering. He was just 23. "Without my father [Arthur], it probably wouldn't have worked," he admits. "I didn't fully appreciate what I had let myself in for at the time, but he knew how to run a successful business. We bought what were referred to as assets, but deficits is probably closer. Suppliers blackmailed us into paying off old debts, and we had no choice but to pay them if we were to complete unfinished cars. We needed to have money coming in, but there were so many distractions."

Such as the Trident? The TVR model that became a marque in its own right. Bearing in mind the enmity that existed between Martin and Bill Last – history claims the latter poached the design – it is understandable that he can still barely bring himself to pass comment more than 40 years on. He says: "What's so interesting about the Trident? Bill Last and all that? Hmm. The first [of four] Fissore-built prototypes was floating around when we took over, but we had a very small staff and money was tight so it went on the back-burner. Last was a TVR dealer and went out to Italy to have another car made, this time based on an Austin-Healey chassis, claiming that he was acting for TVR. What really rubbed salt in the wound was that the production cars had glassfibre shells made by Grantura Plastics, which was next door to us. It was supplying our bodies as well. I then went and stole most of the top people there and set up our own moulding shop. Anyway, Last and I did talk about making cars together, but it didn't take long for me to reconsider. I just tried to ignore the whole thing and carry on with my own business."

And Martin did slowly turn things around, making inroads into the USA via Gerry Sagerman – "He came along at just the right time" – and building 48 cars in his first 12 months. But there were other diversions, some of his own making, he says: "When you take over a car manufacturer, you start thinking about new models – shall we do a rear-engined car; a two- or a four-seater? All manner of thoughts. We had [Trident stylist] Trevor Fiore on board and I'd always admired the Fiat 850 Spider, so we decided to do a car based on an Imp chassis." The result was the Tina. "Fissore made two cars for us – a coupé and a convertible – but we realised that TVR wasn't big enough to make them in volume," Martin continues. "I shopped around for a subcontractor and Jensen was interested, but we'd already spent way too much money and had to cut our losses, and develop what we had already. Then there was the move to Bristol Avenue and so on."

The first production TVR designed entirely under Martin's direction was the 2500M, launched at the '71 Earls Court show. "It passed every regulation with flying colours and was



the first car to be steerable after a 30mph crash test," says Martin, allowing himself a rare break from humility. "The engine stayed in position, the doors still opened. Mike Bigland, who designed the chassis, was a bloody genius." And the first of the Ms (as in Martin) proved a hit, only for the good work to be undone when fire swept through the factory in January 1975: "Everything – and I mean everything – was damaged," says Martin. Including himself: "I had flu at the time, and after breathing in the fumes I developed pneumonia. I was unconscious for four days and given the Last Rites, it was that bad. What didn't help was the insurance company, which decided to sandblast the factory without removing anything first. All the equipment and tools, things that had taken years to produce and had survived the fire, were knackered. But we bounced back: at times like that you have to dust yourself down and carry on."

'I had never been interested in TVRs. But I had a go in the first Griffith and it was incredibly quick, so I bought one and went racing'

Such stoicism led to further popular models such as the 3000S roadster and the Taimar hatchback. "That worked very well," he says. "It was an obvious idea, really: people wanted to be able to get at their luggage." TVR also created a bit of history on the quiet by becoming the first British maker to offer a turbocharged production car with the Turbo. "We developed it with Ralph Broad, but it was bloody expensive and intended only as a flagship," Martin recalls. "That thing accelerated like Concorde."

Then it all began to unravel as TVR went all origami. "There was simple reasoning behind the Tasmin," he says. "Making cars by hand takes a long time, and we needed a product that was easier to build and required fewer parts. We started from scratch [in 1977]; I wanted something completely new. Most important, it had to be comfortable: TVRs always had small doors and were difficult to get into. Here, we sat in the bare tub and designed the car around us. The problem was, I went from the sketches [by Oliver Winterbottom]. When the mock-up was finished, it wasn't quite there: it looked too much like a Saab Sonett. But there were budget and time factors to consider, and to start again would have buggered everything up."

Launched at the 1980 Geneva Salon, the Tasmin wasn't greeted with enthusiasm, but Martin was soon preoccupied by an altogether more grave predicament. TVR's newly appointed US distributor had incorrectly filled out paperwork regarding emissions eligibility and consequently some 25 vehicles were impounded. The loss of expected revenue, allied to the onset of recession, ensured that TVR's future once again hung in the balance. "When you run out of money it's a strange feeling," he says. "It made me ill. Peter Wheeler was a good customer and pally with our sales manager, Stuart Halstead, about whom I don't want to say anything." Another pause: "Peter took a bunch of cars off us as security for a loan, and there was supposed to be a deal whereby he would buy a stake in the business. That took a lot longer than expected and, to save the company, I in effect gave it to him. Peter had the enthusiasm and the cash to make it work – and he did."

Since his departure in 1981, Martin has had few dealings with the marque and instead looks after his property interests. When pressed about how he would turn things around, he ruminates on a question he's clearly been asked umpteen times previously, before calmly stating: " I would go back to using a standard production engine – try to persuade Jaguar to allow the use of its petrol V8 and maybe even the diesel V6. I would produce no more than eight or 10 cars a week and sub-lease the rest of the factory. TVR should be a small-volume manufacturer like Morgan.

"The situation now is much the same as it was in 1965, except for one big difference: there must be 7000 TVRs on the road in 2007. You only need a tenth of those owners to place orders and, once free from overheads, you're laughing. There's enormous loyalty towards TVR. The proposal to build cars in Italy is, I'm sure, dead and buried. It would have been the end: TVR has to be British, because that's where much of the attraction lies." And would he consider taking it on one last time? Cue laughter: "Well, they can always ask!"

GETTY

Clockwise from left: Lilley-instigated M-series cars during build; Imp-based Tina; legendary topless motor-show models were Martin's idea; 10 TVR 'Martins' were built to mark a decade at the helm; early wedges at the works; gorgeous Trident

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Left-right: welded, blasted and powder-coated chassis frame; body went from black to yellow; rebuilt Ford motor packs twin Weber 40s; delighted owner Emma

Rebuild ensures a sound future

One woman's quest to preserve a rare Vixen

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY **EMMA AIREY**

My first encounter with a TVR came when I was 15 years old. I was wandering through a crowded town centre when I heard this tremendous roar, followed by popping and banging, behind me. As I turned, I saw an aggressive-looking black sports car with a huge tea-tray spoiler flash past me with flames shooting out of the exhaust. It sounded fabulous and I knew then that I had to have one – whatever it was (a 450SEAC, it transpired).

A decade later, I bought my first TVR, a 350i S2 that had done just 14,000 miles. I adored it and used to commute to Park Royal via Hanger Lane Gyratory every day. It was outrageous, a real head-turner. Sadly, the 'wedge' had to go to help fund a house purchase, but I later owned a 400SE and two Chimaeras. During a visit to a TVR specialist in 2001, however, I noticed a lime-green Vixen – a quirky little car that needed more investigation. That research proved fatal.

Everyone I spoke to who owned, or had owned, a Vixen said that they handle superbly and that it's almost impossible to get one to step out of line. So I started my search, and a year later I was still looking.

My quest culminated in the purchase of an S3 project that I spotted on *PistonHeads* for £1050. Its owner had been *en route* to a track day when there was a big bang from the back end. Inspection revealed that a chassis tube had cracked, and the car was laid up for years before the owner decided to strip it for a rebuild that never happened. I bought the various boxes of bits, brought them home in a lorry and improvised storage in my bedroom, living room, hallway and garden!

While the chassis was off being sorted, the shell, doors and bonnet went into the paintshop. The bodyshell was in a mess, so I decided to change the colour. Bright shades suit the Vixen anyway, and most came in red, orange, yellow, green or white.

I kept the four-speed gearbox because I didn't want to alter the car's character. It's mostly used for short journeys to and from club events, so the original ratios are ideal for point-and-squirt driving.

It retains the period feel inside, too – retrimmed in black vinyl, with the headliner in charcoal grey to give a cosier feel. The rear 'screen is huge and lets in plenty of light, so it doesn't feel too claustrophobic.

The first 500 miles following the rebuild were disappointing, though. The car didn't perform how I had hoped it would – until the odometer reached 1500 miles. Then it started to come alive. I had twin Webers fitted, too, which improved performance.

I love the car's handling and looks – and, apart from running out of petrol, it has never let me down. There is no drivetrain shunt or overheating in traffic. For such a tiny car, there is incredible head- and legroom, too. I also like the way that it involves you. The transmission tunnel is huge, so you feel cosseted, and it's a good place to rest your elbow between gearchanges. It's rewarding to drive as well, and more fun than any of my more modern TVRs were – or indeed my Maserati GranSport.

For anyone contemplating a classic, I'd thoroughly recommend the experience. For the price of a secondhand modern, you can own a unique piece of TVR history.

Emma had a four-point rollcage fitted directly to the Vixen's chassis to improve its ride and handling

“The engine had seized. The only way I could get the pistons out was to smash them with a heavy bar”

Meet the tweaked and tuned TVR 2500 that proved to be the silver lining to a lost first love

WORDS **MICK WALSH** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW/JM PHOTOGRAPHY**

There is always a very special attachment to our formative cars. The excitement of that early motoring freedom and subsequent adventures lives long in the memory. That nostalgia often stimulates a yearning to rediscover those memorable times through ownership renewal and dedicated restoration of that original machine. Mark 'Hank' Hankins' first car, a Triumph Spitfire, was stolen after a few unforgettable early years, but its replacement, a 1971 TVR 2500 bought from his brother with the insurance money, was driven until it broke. He then pushed it into a barn in Cornwall, promising to one day restore it.

The link with Triumphs and Triumph-powered cars started with his father. "Dad had a TR4 with a Surrey Top and with my brother and sister we'd all squeeze in for trips," recalls Mark. "My Spitfire 1500, which I bought from my brother, John, was very rusty and I ended up stripping it down before I could drive. It was great to work on, and by the time I was 17 it was a really nice car. I owned it for five years and took it to art school in Falmouth. The student loan for my final year paid for a respray."

The escapades with the Spitfire continued with Mark's first job in Italy. He says: "I drove it to Montebelluna, just north of Venice, with a friend in his MG Midget. There were three Ferrari F40s in the town, and I'll never forget one pulling up alongside me at the traffic lights; everyone was more interested in my Spitfire! We had some great trips driving around the Dolomites, but coming back down from the mountains with a suspect master cylinder was nerve-wracking."

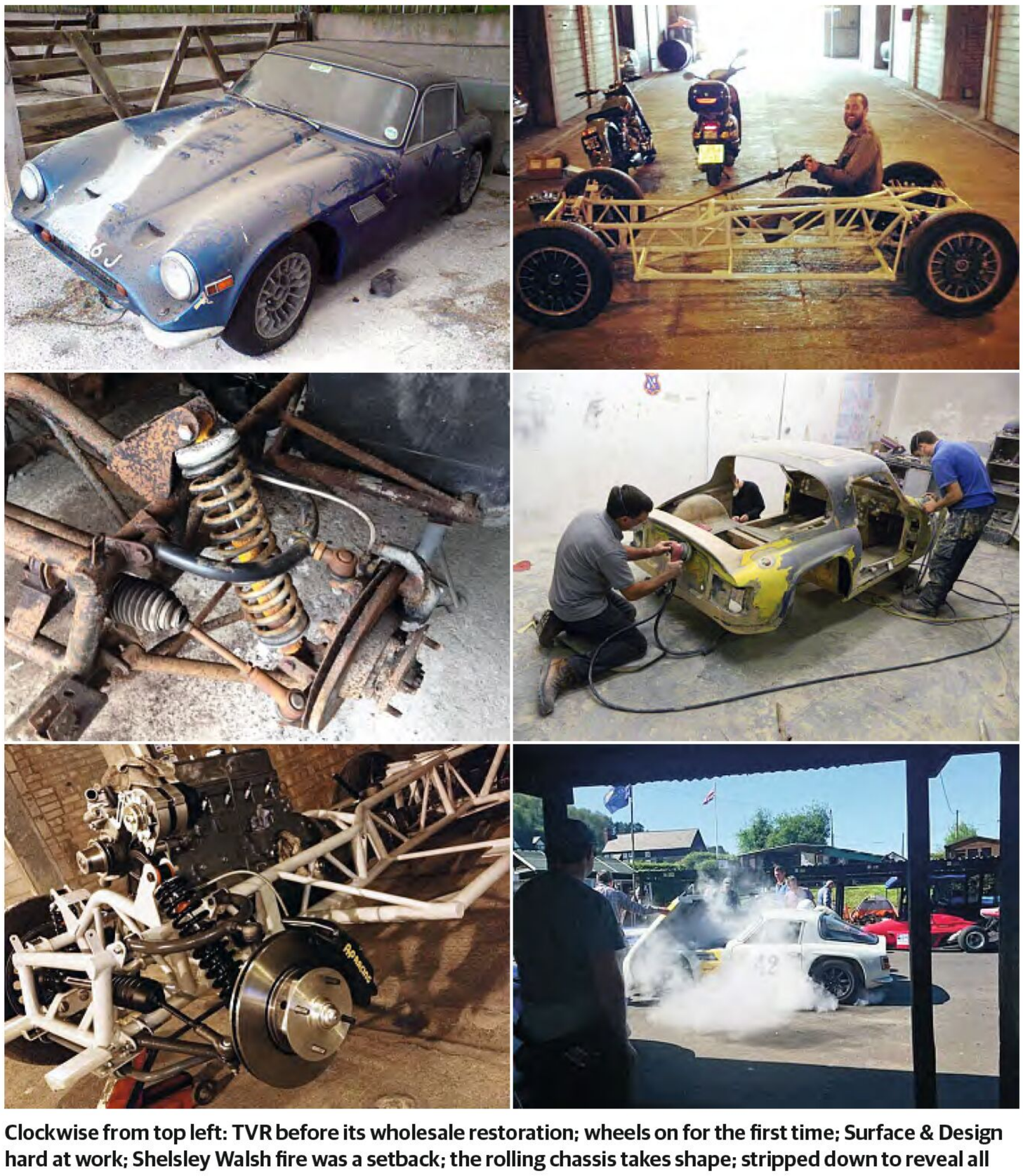
The Spitfire was eventually driven back to England. "It only had second, third and overdrive," he continues. "No reverse or fourth. It was loaded with luggage, and the GT6 wheels kept scraping the arches. It was stolen from outside my parents' house. It was registered LOT 15R; I'd love to know what happened to it."

The insurance money of £1700 was exactly what his brother wanted for his TVR 2500. "It was really rough, but I liked it and used it for several years," says Mark. "The dark-blue metallic paintwork had flaked, the sunroof leaked and the interior was awful and ripped to shreds. I used to commute in it from Blackheath to Bermondsey, but the starter was really dodgy and required a heavy hit with a hammer or someone to bump-start it. I asked a girl at work to sit in while I pushed; she took one look inside and said she'd rather push. The engine also suffered from petrol vaporisation in traffic – the fuel lines were all around the engine – and would leave me stranded. I remember pushing it around Hyde Park Corner in rush hour."

After running the 2500 as his daily car for a few years, Mark eventually took it off the road with the intention of just rebuilding the brakes and suspension. He recalls: "I took it back to Cornwall in 1994 and rented a garage with a plan to work on it at weekends. Life in London became too busy and the TVR moved around various garages and barns as other cars absorbed my time. It was going to be my retirement project."

Automotive distractions included a Renault Clio Williams, a Daimler Dart and a Porsche 928S, as well as various motorcycles ranging from a Sunbeam S7 Deluxe to MV Agustas. A Daimler Sovereign was enlisted to tow his kart, which with a friend Mark raced in four-and-a-half-hour enduro events. "Karting was great fun, but it became too expensive and we stopped in 2010," he says. "My cousin needed the space where the TVR was stored, so I rented another garage in Cornwall with plans to start restoring the car. I took out the engine and brought it back to London in my Mercedes CLK with the passenger seat removed. My boss, Chris Pring, lent me his engine stand, and I started rebuilding it in a rented underground garage beneath my flat. It had no electricity and during the winter it was cold and damp, with the wind whistling through. I used to look like the Michelin man, with several layers on when working on the car. I had always maintained

Yellow stripe takes its inspiration from the Ecurie Nationale Belge team



Clockwise from top left: TVR before its wholesale restoration; wheels on for the first time; Surface & Design hard at work; Shelsley Walsh fire was a setback; the rolling chassis takes shape; stripped down to reveal all

my cars but had never done anything on that level. As a result I was bit obsessive and bagged and labelled everything I could."

Removing the pistons was the first challenge: "The engine had completely seized," explains Mark. The only way I could get them out was using a heavy bar to smash them. They eventually disintegrated. Revington TR wasn't cheap but was always very helpful. Eventually I gave the block to them for the machining."

While the engine was away, Mark made more trips back down to the south-west to further strip the TVR and bring brakes and suspension parts back to London to rebuild. "My mate Pete Jordan was totally invaluable," he says. "He became my mobile mechanical helpline because my calls for advice were constant. I would describe an issue on the phone and he always knew the answer."

Back in Cornwall, the body was removed from the chassis and hung from the ceiling. "Although the main tubes were okay, the outriggers were completely rotten," he recalls. "David Gerald TVR quoted £1500 to repair it, but offered a new one for £1800. A customer had backed out and the deal was too good to refuse. The original had been brazed, but this was MIG-welded and better protected. I didn't want it powder-coated because it's impossible to patch if gets damaged, so I opted to paint it myself. I went for POR15, a rust-preventive paint, which is hideous stuff. You have to mix it in small batches because it dries hard in just 15 minutes. In mid-winter over a weekend I started at one end before flipping it over to paint the other side with undercoat and then repeating with two paint layers. My lighting was battery-powered, but to see more I rolled it out between the garages. Once it was painted

"I decided on a tentative trip to Box Hill to start running-in, but the car went so well I continued on to the south coast and back"

I started the reassembly with the help of my friends James Mitchell and Ross Sharp. Ross was working for Pace Engineering and would get components powder-coated at work on the cheap. The engine was rebuilt with a Stage 2 head and oversized valves. The bills came to about £15,000, even with me doing most of the assembly. John Leyland, a mechanic friend of James, came round to check the timing for me and wouldn't take any money for the work."

The chassis slowly came together with further upgrades, including a quick steering rack, AP Racing four-pot front calipers, Alfin rear drums and AVO adjustable dampers, while a new close-ratio gearbox came from Enginuity. Other modifications included a Stag layshaft for stronger bearings and an overdrive. Says Mark: "The upgrades often became a challenge because not everything fitted or the new part had a knock-on effect with other problems."

While the chassis progressed, Mark returned to Cornwall to collect the body. "I hired a tail-lift van, and with Pete's help we drove it up to Blackpool one August Bank Holiday," he recalls. "The traffic was a nightmare, but it felt good taking it back to the old Bristol Avenue factory where Surface & Design is now based. They are former TVR people and did a fantastic job. The sunroof was filled in and old accident damage repaired. They also rebuilt the hinges, fitted window frames and made footwell modifications so I could fit a third carburettor. The bill eventually came to £12,000."

For the colour, Mark wanted to include an element of the original yellow found under the blue paint, and the Ecurie Nationale Belge scheme on a Ferrari 250GTO became the inspiration. "I didn't want a metallic silver," Mark says. "Surface & Design kept sending me swatches, but it was hard to judge. In the end I went for Rover Toga White with the contrasting yellow stripe done in vinyl."

Clockwise from main: race-ready interior, but it's very comfortable on the road; TR6-derived engine has been fettled by Classic and Race; Watergate Bay Speed Hillclimb's 'surprise' chicane; 385 2500s left TVR's factory; little coupé measures just 3683mm

With the body painted, and with the help of James and Ross, the chassis was completed and taken up to Blackpool to fit the body. "The cars are notorious for not being symmetrical, but this one went together okay," Mark says. "My 2500's body is bolted on; the later cars were bonded, which would have been a nightmare."

With the chassis and body back together, the project headed back to London for finishing and detailing. "Electrics are my weak point, and because a loom wasn't available I sent it to a specialist," he continues. "They also added the rollbar, which was a snug fit, but I wasn't impressed with the welding and a few other things. I then took it to Classic and Race near Gatwick and within a couple of hours it was transformed, with extra horsepower found."

Finally, after nearly five years' work, came the first drive. "I decided on a tentative trip to Box Hill to start running-in," he says. "It was winter and I didn't have a heater, but the car went so well I continued on to the south coast, along to Beachy Head, through Kent and back to London. The Tillett carbonfibre seat is so comfortable I could drive all day.

"The plan had always been to sprint the TVR, and before entering the Vintage Sports-Car Club's Pomeroy Trophy it went back to Classic and Race for fine-tuning and setting up the suspension. I knew I'd lost before starting because the suitcases and spare wouldn't fit in [an event requirement] due to the rollbar. The 2500 is heavy, at 920kg, and with only 124bhp it's not that competitive – particularly because I was on original wheels. The 40-minute high-speed trial was held on the Grand Prix circuit and I had a good dice with a pair of MX-5s."

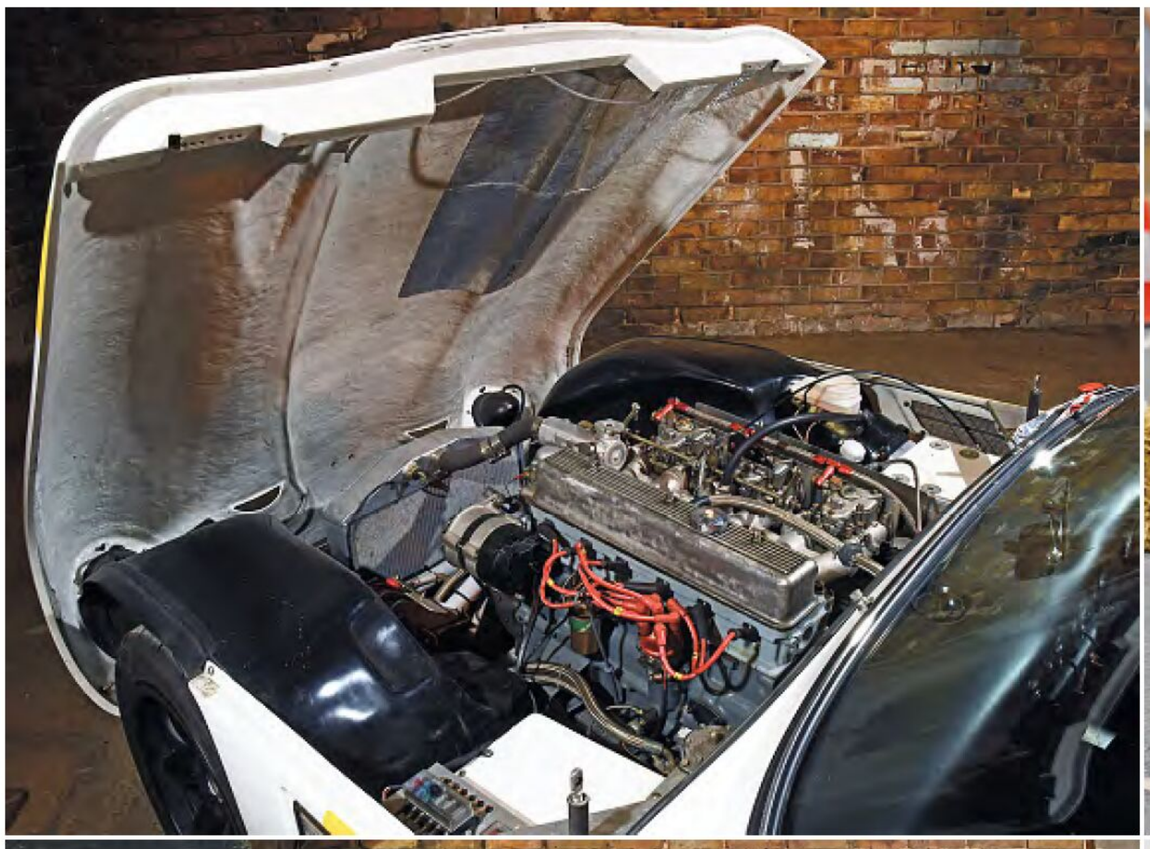
From that highly enjoyable debut, Mark campaigned the 2500 regularly in the TVR and Classic Marques series of hillclimbs and sprints, in which he took his first class win at Lydden Hill. "It's a really friendly group with lots of banter about excuses," he says. "For double-headers we camp and eat together. Shelsley Walsh seems to be an unlucky event for me, though: when my master cylinder failed, fellow competitor Steve Dennis generously lent me his road car to go to Coventry to get a repair kit. He also helped fit it and I just made the first afternoon runs."

More serious was a fire on the Shelsley startline caused by a flooded foam air filter, says Mark: "Suddenly the car was fully alight and I had to set off the fire extinguisher, which is so corrosive. Immediately the engine bay looked 10 years older. Another competitor trailered me to a local garage and the AA Relay trip home took 14 hours. Shelsley is a lovely place, but the course isn't very rewarding. Sprinting is addictive and you are shaking at the end of run, particularly at Gurston Down where I'm on the ragged edge."

For his second Pomeroy Trophy, in 2018, the 2500 returned more sorted, with new wheels and tyres and a much stiffer suspension set-up. "The car felt transformed," he says. "I had a good battle with an E-type and then a Porsche 944 turbo until he spun off."

But the highlight was a return to Cornwall last year when the Truro Motor Club revived the historic hillclimb up Watergate Bay. "It was a great weekend, and all my family and friends came out to watch," Mark says. "I'd driven the hill a thousand times and cockily didn't walk the course, but on the first run I discovered they'd put in a chicane with hay bales. Against an Atom and quick Caterhams I didn't think I had a chance, but at the prizegiving they called me up as class winner. I thought they'd made a mistake." Unfortunately, Mark's pal Pete Jordan was away and missed the memorable return.

"Running in the TVR championship against Griffiths, Cerberas and Chimaeras," he reflects, "I sometimes regret not starting with a more competitive car, such as a lighter Vixen with a 1600 crossflow engine. But people are always coming up and saying how glorious the 'six' sounds. The engine is torquey and the handling is really neutral. I've never driven anything that handles so well; you can really chuck it around. My brother jokes about wanting it back, but I tell him he'll have to pay all the bills, too. There are no regrets now."



New wheels and revised suspension transformed the 2500 on both the road and track, to which Hank doesn't trailer his racer – he drives it to each competitive event

short & sweet

TVR's wild Tuscan SE is the ultra-rare '60s sensation that set the template for the outrageous V8 machines that would follow three decades later

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

It's not unheard of for TVRs to try to kill the unwary, but rarely by asphyxiation. The Special Equipment installed in this 1968 Tuscan sadly doesn't stretch to a respirator. The heady whiff of fuel – later traced to a leaking tank – isn't alleviated by the woeful lack of ventilation. Not that any of this really matters, mind, because driving one of these charismatic firebrands doesn't give you much chance to catch your breath anyway. Think of it as the Cerbera of the '60s and you'll get the idea.

In marque lore, the Tuscan SE is the choice of the *cognoscenti*. The earlier Griffith has become a performance icon, but this was the better car. Introduced at the 1967 New York Auto Show, the Tuscan was a step forward in terms of driveability and, relatively speaking, styling. The basis remained a steel backbone chassis, clothed with a body derived from the Grantura, but with revisions in line with its forthcoming Vixen replacement – not least the smoother bonnet and rectangular Mk2 Cortina tail-lights replacing the round 'Ban the Bomb' Mk1 items.

Power, as for the Griffith, came courtesy of Ford Industrial Power Products. You could opt for the 4.7-litre small-block V8 in entry-level 195bhp trim or plump for the 271bhp Hi-Po version in the SE, which used a chassis stretched by 7in, originally intended for the ill-starred Trident. If you were really brave there was the option of 306bhp, but precisely where the extra power was found remains a mystery to most TVR types.

The result was a car capable of blistering straight-line performance. *Motor* recorded a 0-60mph time of 5.7 secs for a car in Hi-Po trim; by way of comparison, a Miura took 6.1 secs.

The only real sticking point was the price. At £2364 for the long-wheelbase model, an E-type roadster could have been yours for about £400 less; even a coupé was £80 cheaper. You really had to want a Tuscan. Sadly, few did, and the arrival of the 'wide-body' version in 1968 with styling revisions that hinted at the future M-series (along with a 4in broader waist) did little to tempt punters. By 1970, the Tuscan was no more. Just 73 of all types were made, most of which went to the USA.

Of the 11 right-hand-drive, long-wheelbase SEs sold, very few remain, which makes this period-perfect example a rare survivor. Stubby, squat and quite cute if you squint a bit, the Tuscan still isn't an altogether pretty car, the familiar outline having been pushed, pulled, chopped and tweaked from the original Grantura Mk1 of 1957, itself fashioned from a pair of Microplas bonnets. But it does have character; it makes you smile.

Getting in is a feat of some dexterity: the low roof and short door don't make it easy. With the engine mounted so far back (51% front, 49% rear weight distribution), the transmission tunnel eats into available cabin space, and the close proximity of the doors crowds you in. It isn't cramped, just a bit narrow. The seating position is a little skewed, with the handsome, alloy-spoked wheel canted slightly to the right (the steering rack passes though the exhaust manifold) and the pedals to the left.

Styling based on the Grantura and Vixen, with the wheelbase extended by 7in and Mk2 Ford Cortina-sourced tail-lights

Left: Special Equipment included walnut dash and leather. Above: 4.7-litre Ford V8 produces 271bhp in Hi-Po spec

None of this really comes into play when driving because you soon acclimatise, yet you feel as if you are sitting on the floor, thanks in part to the high scuttle. It's airy, too, due to the expansive glasshouse – even if there is a big blindspot in the rear shoulder panel. What really lets it down are the seats, the tops of which rest right under your shoulder blades.

That said, it's a good-looking package, with the SE spec's walnut fascia, leather-rim wheel, two-speed wipers and other extras. The white-on-black Smiths instruments are easily legible, with MGB heater controls and next-to-useless Rover 3-Litre fresh-air outlets that actually pump out hot air once the engine is warm.

But you can live with this just for the sound on start-up. Through a pair of perilously low stainless-steel pipes, the gloriously rude noises upon turning the key are worth the price of admission alone. At idle, there's just the familiar 'blup, blup' backbeat; flex the throttle pedal and the Tuscan is commotion itself.

This isn't the easiest car to get off the line smoothly, due in part to a tall first gear (apparently you can hit 70mph before moving up a cog). After that, second and third arrive in close succession, with a noticeable drop in revs as you shift into fourth. Changes in the Borg-Warner T-10 gearbox are close-coupled, with the stubby lever annoyingly placed to the left of the handbrake (on the American side), but such is the torque – a whopping 314lb ft at 3400rpm – you're rarely called upon to use it. And the limited-slip differential does a commendable job of preventing wheelspin.

Acceleration is incendiary (standing quarter-miles in 14.1 secs – in 1967), but the Tuscan doesn't act like a back-street hot rod. Instead, it's a benign old thing. With TVR's own double-wishbone arrangement properly located at each end, plus those precious few extra inches in the wheelbase, the ride isn't especially pliant, but neither does it hunt for camber changes or tramline excessively. You can drive quickly without feeling as if you're a passenger.

There is the constant danger of bottoming out over rougher surfaces, however, and there is discernible kickback through the steering. Firm springing and damping keeps body roll to a minimum, and your initial – and natural – caution gradually fades with familiarity as you begin to try that little bit harder.

It isn't difficult to provoke the tail into sliding, but you really need to push it, and even then only in tight corners. If anything, its natural instinct is to understeer, shifting to neutrality under power. The rack-and-pinion steering (a Triumph Herald-derived Alford & Alder set-up) is never overly communicative when playing with the car's attitude, but by far the biggest flaw is the brakes. By the standards of the day, the TR5-sourced Girling discs at the front and rear drums are no worse than those of most rivals. But today, even with the addition of a remote servo, they are woefully inadequate when scrubbing speed in a hurry – or at all.

What you derive from spending even a few hours with a Tuscan – headache and a fear of matches aside – is a sense of how uncelebrated it is. Like all TVRs, the SE has faults. Lots of them. But these only serve to reinforce the good points. You may well sneer that it's nothing more than a parts-bin receptacle, but show us a sports car that isn't. Beating up on exotica has never been so much fun.

Thanks to *Chris Lowe for the loan of the Tuscan; Doug Ellwood for historical information*

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A FORD

Ford V6 engine, glassfibre body, separate chassis, low-slung build, lots of proprietary running gear: the TVR 3000M and Marcos 3-Litre share so much in terms of concept and building blocks that they promise to be essentially similar in driving personality. But they're not.

The contrast is revealed as soon as you settle behind their small, three-spoke steering wheels. The Marcos places you like a racing driver, so low and stretched out that you're almost lying flat on your back, tightly confined by transmission tunnel, steering wheel and door. In any other company the TVR's seating would feel sporting and reclined, but after the Marcos it seems far closer to that of a normal car. The way you adjust driving position sums up the difference: the TVR's chair has a lever for conventional fore/aft movement, but the Marcos seat is fixed – it's the pedal assembly that moves, by means of a knurled dashboard knob that gives a good 12in of travel.

This character distinction infuses much of the road behaviour of these cars. The TVR is very usable, with the blend of comfort and handling hitting just the right note for a sports-car driver. The Marcos is altogether a more specialised machine, its race-orientated roots giving it great handling on a smooth road, but making it a real handful on rougher surfaces. What they share is effortless power delivery from the Ford Essex V6 engine.

Rather like the Rover V8 of later years, use of this 2994cc V6 was widespread among specialist manufacturers – Reliant and Gilbern also chose it at the time. Specification-wise,

'The TVR is very usable, but the Marcos is more specialised, its race-orientated roots giving it great handling on a smooth road'

TVR and Marcos share a Ford V6 recipe, but the end results are quite different

WORDS **MARK HUGHES** PHOTOGRAPHY **DAVID SHEPHERD**

DOUBLE

there's nothing special about this all-iron, single-cam, pushrod unit, which develops an unexceptional 138bhp at 5000rpm. Torque, though, is the V6's strength: the peak is 172lb ft at 3000rpm, but there's a strong flow of pulling power available from much lower. Through the mid-range this engine sounds as good as it feels, its mellow beat drowning the tappety noise that accompanies low-speed running. There's no point in stretching the engine too far because power tails off markedly towards the breathless 6000rpm maximum, which isn't indicated on the rev counter in either car.

Both cars are so light – less than a tonne – that acceleration remains impressive even today. There is little to choose between them in standard form, with 0-60mph coming up in 7.6 secs for the TVR (*Autocar*) and 7.8 secs in the Marcos (*Motor*), while top speeds are 122 and 125mph respectively. The differences are explained by weight (the TVR is 100kg heavier) and gearing (the TVR uses a Triumph 3.45:1 final drive, the Marcos a 3.5:1 Salisbury unit), and probably aerodynamics, too. This particular Marcos, it should be added, goes rather more quickly because it has been bored to 3.1 litres and breathes through triple Weber carburettors – although they are tuning tweaks that could be applied just as readily to the TVR.

The gearchange is excellent on both cars, despite different Ford four-speed gearboxes being fitted. This Marcos, a 1969 wooden-chassis car, is an older design and therefore uses a Zodiac 'box with Laycock overdrive on the top two ratios, whereas the 1973 TVR has a non-overdrive Capri unit. Ford transmissions were among the best in the business at the time, so both cars give a smooth, accurate and reasonably light change through a short lever. With the TVR, the rearward mounting of the powertrain brings the stick too far back for comfort: changing gear requires such an awkward movement from your left shoulder that it's easy to grab the adjacent handbrake by mistake. In both cars, close placing of the brake pedal and organ-type throttle allows heel-and-toe downchanges, although this isn't easy in the Marcos because the low steering wheel tends to lock your leg in one position.

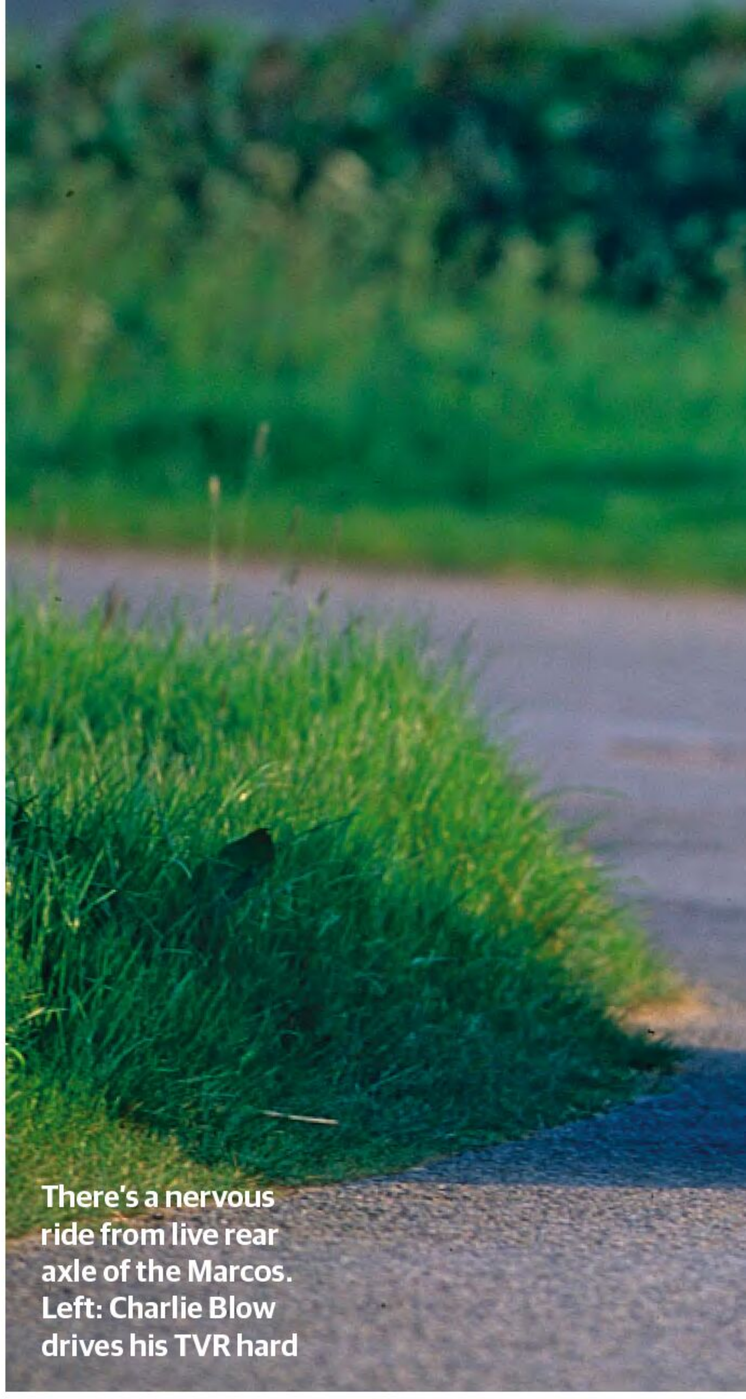
The TVR's ride is decent for a sports car: firm but not harsh, especially when the suspension is well maintained and set up, as on this example. There's enough spring compliance to prevent spine-jarring reactions over bumps, but a little body roll is a consequence. You have to avoid driving too briskly down a bumpy road because minimal ground clearance (barely 2in

at the sump and exhaust) sometimes causes the resonator boxes to grind against the Tarmac.

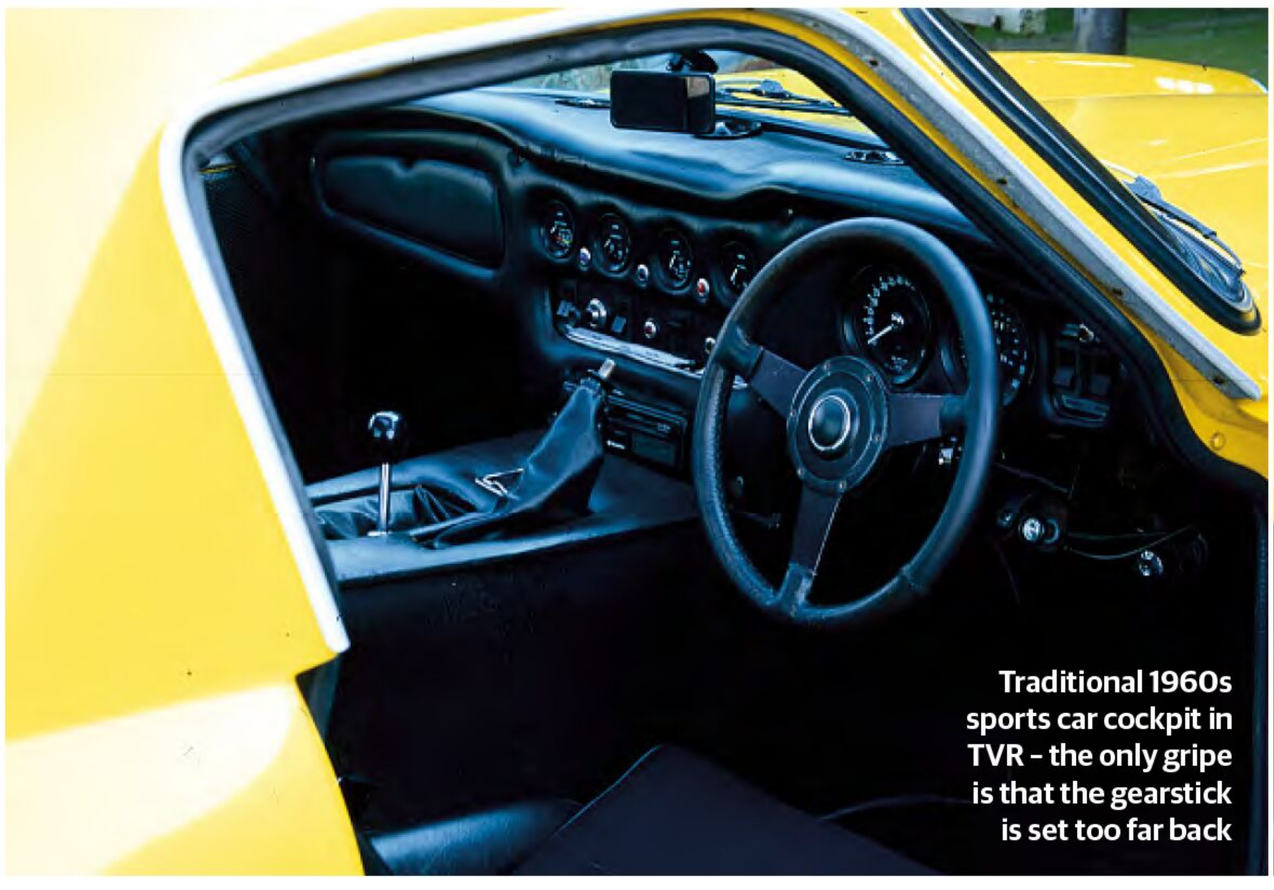
Charging down twisty roads in the TVR is fabulous fun because the handling is so assured. This car has classic rear-wheel-drive characteristics, diving into corners with a neutral stance that transfers progressively to mild oversteer as you power through. The harder you try, the more you can move the back end, although restraint is needed because mid-corner bumps hint that they could make the rear wheels snap suddenly – and these cars have a reputation for being easy to lose in the wet. Grip is impressive on standard 185/65 HR14 tyres, Goodyear Eagle NCTs in this case.

Trying the Marcos on a track might be another matter, but over public roads, with their varieties of surface and camber, this car's ride and handling are nowhere near as civilised. Basically the difference comes down to suspension stiffness, although the Marcos' live rear axle is unsophisticated compared with the TVR's double-wishbone independent rear end. These two factors make for much more wild progress, which is rewarding in some respects but ultimately limits commitment behind the wheel. Bumps throw the tail of the car all over the place, and you find yourself working hard at the steering, sometimes even in a straight line. The plywood chassis used on a pre-1970 Marcos must be an exceptionally robust structure: it accepts without complaint, other than the occasional creak or groan, all the stresses imposed by this harshness.

Steering, by rack and pinion, is light and accurate in both cars, but the feel is rather different. The Marcos' quick ratio and kickback make the wheel very lively, although this car does have an advantage in manoeuvrability: its turning circle is so much smaller (31ft against the TVR's 50ft). Otherwise, the TVR's steering is



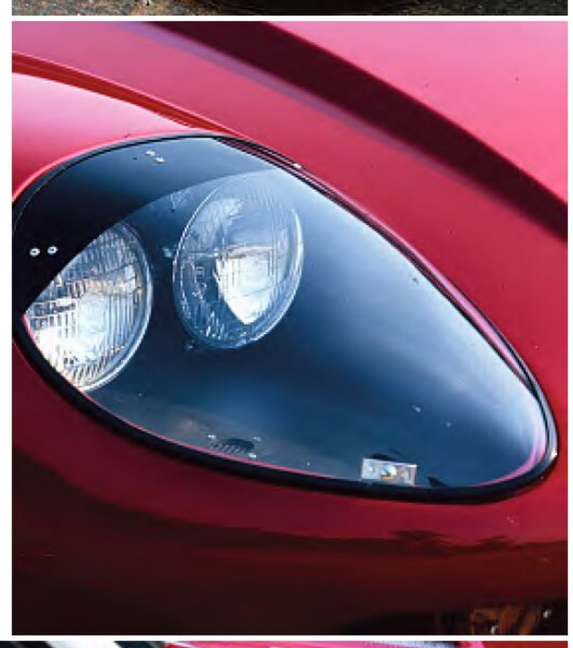
There's a nervous ride from live rear axle of the Marcos. Left: Charlie Blow drives his TVR hard



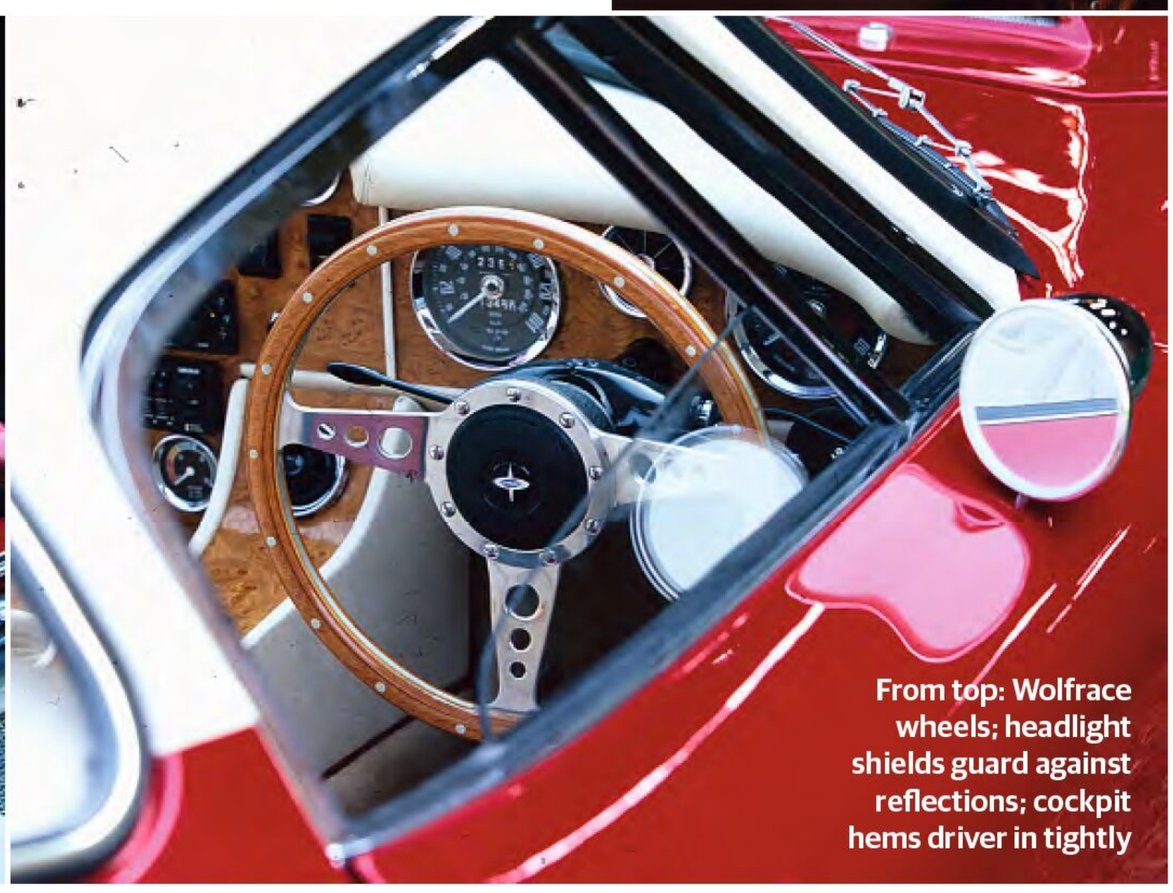
Traditional 1960s sports car cockpit in TVR – the only gripe is that the gearstick is set too far back

Robust 3-litre Ford V6 makes 138bhp as standard, but delivers effortless torque at all revs

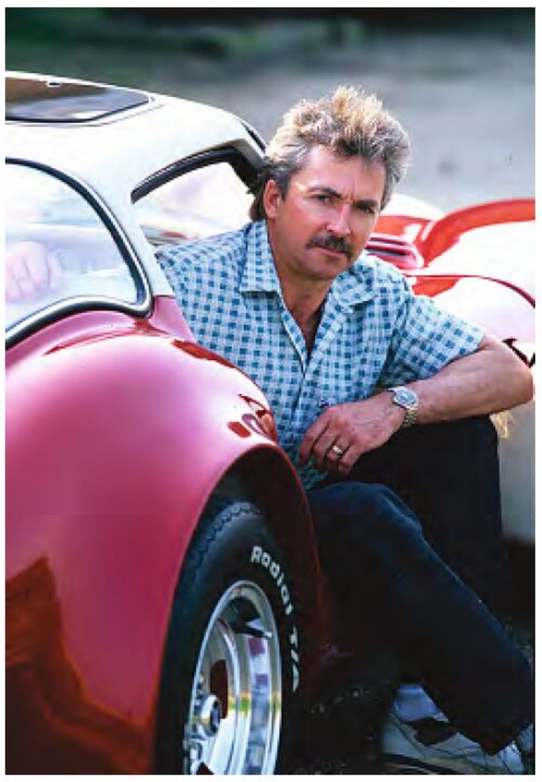
Grip is good in the dry, but the low-slung 3000M is prone to grounding its exhaust on bumps



This Marcos' V6 is overbored and runs three Webers. Below: modified Marcos man Mike McCullagh



From top: Wolfrace wheels; headlight shields guard against reflections; cockpit hems driver in tightly



superior, with a fluid action and a better ratio for the road. Neither car has great brakes, their disc/drum set-ups lacking the bite and sustained stopping power of moderns.

To match the sense of occasion these gutsy cars bring to any drive, both have wonderfully purposeful interiors. The seats are deeply shaped, hugging you tightly, and divided in both cars by a huge transmission tunnel, which adds to the feeling that you're shoehorned into a rocketship. Both dashboards display a fine array of instruments, with the two big dials ahead of the driver, a row of minor gauges in the centre and rocker switches lined up below.

In terms of practicality – or absence thereof – both cars have peculiarities. The 3000M's big disadvantage is the lack of an opening boot, although the luggage platform behind the seats provides plenty of space. With the Marcos, poor forward vision is a handicap – the high nose sometimes blocks too much of your sight from the ground-floor seating position – but the view down that long bonnet is fantastic. Ventilation is barely adequate in the TVR and atrocious in the Marcos. Both have Triumph eyeball vents, but those in the Marcos can't overcome the engine heat that blasts upwards through the gearlever gaiter, sometimes making the knob uncomfortably hot to hold.

Such shortcomings, though, are a feature of most specialist sports cars and part of their character. These machines are all about travelling fast in surroundings of exhilarating rawness, capturing the essentials of driving in a period when traffic was much less dense and in-car cupholders hadn't been thought about. They are both inspiring company, but the TVR is the better car.

PHOENIX KNIGHTS

The Taimar and 3000S breathed new life into TVR's M-series. This Ford-powered hatch and convertible pairing recalls Blackpool's rockin' 1970s era

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

It seemed a simple enough question. What precisely is a Taimar? You won't find it in any dictionary. But spend five minutes in an online TVR chatroom and the answer soon appears: it's a contraction of TAIlgate and MARtin.

That's Martin, as in former TVR boss Martin Lilley, who could be forgiven for not using his entire surname as a model designation. Yet it's a vowel and consonant more than his previous contribution with the M-series. Introduced in June 1972, this new strain from Blackpool set the scene for the marque's revival following a calamity-prone existence in the years prior.

The new M-series was offered in three configurations, and the baby of the family was the 1600M with a 1599cc Ford Kent engine. That proved to be a slow seller and was dropped the following year, only to be reintroduced in 1975 before being canned yet again shortly afterwards. Then there was the 2500M, with its 2498cc Triumph straight-six that proved a big hit overseas, but whose emissions-emasculated performance kept it out of the UK line-up from 1973.

More resonant to the home market was the 3000M that would become a mainstay throughout the 1970s. Confined to Britain for much of its life because its 2994cc Ford V6 was 'dirty', it was essentially a virtuous machine but not without its flaws. *Motor* complimented the range-topper's performance (0-60mph in 7.8 secs and a 121mph maximum speed) but judged that, with better accommodation and ventilation, 'this already desirable car would be very good indeed'.

Taking these and other comments to heart, TVR responded with the Taimar. Ushered in at the 1976 Earls Court Motor Show, this variation on the theme was only ever equipped with the Ford V6. Although visually nearly identical to the M-series models, save minor badging, the biggest change was the addition of a rear hatch. Boot space was virtually doubled to 6cu ft with only a 20lb weight penalty, and the tailgate was operated by a neat button in the driver's door jamb. By merit of greatly enhanced practicality, and without any sacrifice to the M's attractive rear styling, the Taimar proved popular despite a hefty £585 premium over the 3000M.

But Lilley wasn't finished. Two years later he followed through with the Convertible (or 3000S, as it's more commonly known) at a time when ragtops were all but extinct among the bigger players. Although underneath lay the same steel backbone chassis, and all-round double wishbones and coils suspension stayed in place, this was much more than merely a top-chop conversion. Reworking the existing shell was greatly involved. The outline below the waist remained similar, but the windscreen was changed from a Mk1 Ford Consul part (a long time TVR constant) to a cut-down Jensen-Healey item within a custom frame. At the rear was an entirely new tail section with a separate boot compartment for reasonable stowage space and doors with cut-down tops that, while slightly odd in appearance, made for ideal armrests when cruising.

Thanks to the new windscreen, the fascia had to be revised because there was no longer room above the steering column for the tachometer and speedo, these items being

moved to the centre of the dashboard. Another snag was the lack of wind-down windows, a consequence of the reprofiling of the doors: detachable sidescreens had become an unwelcome anachronism by the late 1970s.

So it continued until November 1979, when all of the M-series models were dropped (despite remaining on the price list until spring of the following year) as TVR underwent a paradigm shift in ethos and attempted to move further upmarket with the less lovely 280/Tasmin wedges. Around 395 Taimars had been made, along with 258 Convertibles.

Not surprisingly, it's the 3000S that retains the biggest retinue these days while the Taimar continues to be under-appreciated. Marque expert Doug Ellwood claims: "At the present time, the open-top car is understandably the most desirable. There are some out there with their original owners because they like them so much. The thing is, there are probably short of 100 in the UK, of which few are on the road. Personally, I think it's a tremendous-looking car, especially when naked with all the weather equipment off, but even a very nice example will only go for good MGB money."

Doug suggests that it's probably the best of the Lilley era of TVRs, although you have to be wary of all the usual stuff. He adds: "Check that the chassis is sound. I always say that unless you can prove that the frame isn't rotten, it probably is. That's a relatively easy fix, but of course it's going to cost quite a bit. More worrying are the components that are unique to the car. Windscreens aren't a problem, but the chromed-steel surrounds are. If they're rusty, it's expensive to replace. As with most cars of this type, electrics can be a worry, and the fuel tanks can rot out. Even when they were only a few years old, it was relatively common to smell petrol in the boot.

Even Doug admits there's not a lot of demand for the Taimar, saying: "A good, usable car can still be picked up relatively cheaply – it would have to be something pretty exceptional to go for more. Right now, Granturas and Vixens in particular are selling well, but the '70s stuff isn't. The thing with the Taimar is that it isn't

TVR TAIMAR [3000S]

Sold/number built 1976-'79/395 [1978-'79/258]
Construction tubular steel backbone chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 2994cc V6, single twin-choke Weber carburettor
Max power 142bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 172lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual (in-house overdrive optional), RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 12ft 11in (3937mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1625mm)
Height 3ft 8in (1143mm) [3ft 8in (1117mm)]
Wheelbase 7ft 5¾in (2280mm)
Weight 2063lb (936kg) [2000lb (907kg)]
0-60mph 7.5 secs
Top speed 117mph [115mph] **Mpg** n/a
Price new £7886 [£7591] (1979)

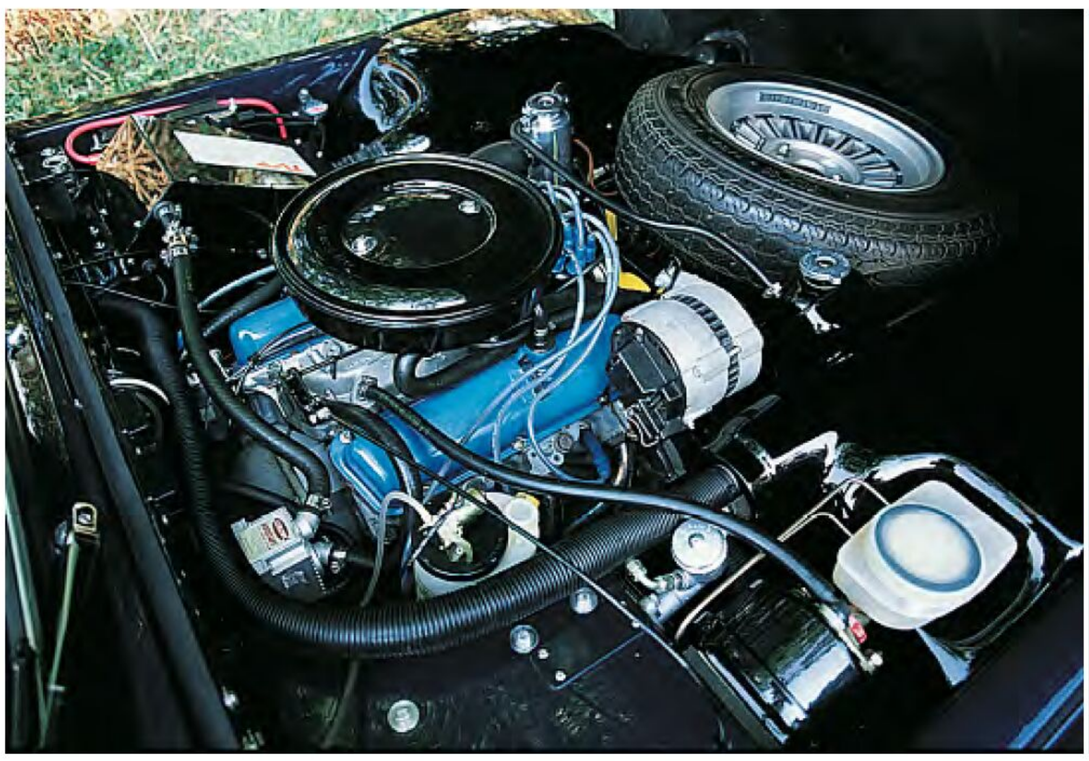
The Convertible, more commonly referred to as the 3000S, is more than just a roof chop, with an entirely new rear end. The 'screen is a cut-down Jensen-Healey item. Dash is revised from Taimar

CLIVE WESTMACOTT
1979 TVR 3000S

Clive Westmacott bought his delightful 3000S in 2002 following a protracted bout of owning "boring cars". He says: "I grew up around proper cars: my dad was in the Vintage Sports-Car Club. In the past I had a Riley Nine Monaco and thought about buying another before getting this, but they're too pricey. I bought the TVR because it has character and a classic feel: there are no black boxes to get in the way."

JUSTIN FORWOOD
1977 TVR TAIMAR

About as perfect a Taimar as you're ever likely to encounter, Justin's Forwood's 1977 example currently lives with an early 'non-cat' Griffith. He says: "I bought the car in 1991 and spent just over two and a half years restoring it. Everything was stripped down and rebuilt apart from the gearbox, which only needed new seals." Buying the car had such an effect on Justin that he's now the Buckinghamshire area organiser for the TVR Car Club.



Clockwise from top: Taimar was the ultimate incarnation of 30 years of chop-and-change TVR styling – rear hatch added much-needed practicality but only 20lb extra weight; cabin is roomier than you might expect; Ford V6 is shared by both cars

'These '70s throwbacks are huge fun, and the Taimar is easily the most cohesive of the models made during the firm's first 30 years'

quite as stiff as the M-series cars because of the opening rear hatch, and even when these cars were new it wasn't unusual for exhaust fumes to find their way into the cabin. As to what to look out for, it pretty much mirrors the S. Really, people want open cars, and with more plentiful and newer models such as the V8S or early Griffiths getting cheaper, a lot of enthusiasts are holding out for those."

Not that you should be put off, because these 1970s throwbacks are huge fun, dispelling many – if not quite all – preconceptions of low-volume specialist sports cars. Until the arrival of the much-maligned wedges, TVR didn't so much style cars as leave them to evolve, and the Taimar is easily the most cohesive of the models made during the firm's first 30 years. And while the proportions aren't quite right – the centre section still looks a little lost thanks to those small doors – it remains a pretty-looking car. Characterful, too.

Same, too, for the roadster, which in the right colour – such as the BMW Z3 pale blue shown here – is quite charming. As with most creations of Britain's cottage industry of small-scale car manufacturers, there lingers a slight air of budget-led expediency. Part of the fun, if only as an onlooker, is spotting from which parts bin each component has been lifted, a skill at which TVR is a true past-master: doorhandles from a MkIV Cortina, tail-lights from a Scimitar. The flip-forward front end is a boon for engine access, but it scrapes on the ground when opened (after chipping paint the first time, most owners place a floor mat under the nose), and a puncture will only exacerbate the problem: the spare tyre lives horizontally, high up in front of the radiator.

Having squeezed into the Taimar's cabin, it's nowhere near as cramped as you might expect. The transmission tunnel is wide, yet the seats are comfortable with enough lateral support.

'Both cars display polished manners with a firm but not harsh ride thanks to compliant springing and the independent rear end'

The pedals are slightly offset to the right but well spaced, and the wheel (here a later Momo item) is well sited, without obscuring the classic white-on-black Smiths instruments. Ventilation isn't its strong suit, with only Triumph-sourced eyeball vents to keep you cool, although the optional fold-back Webasto roof does a good job of dissipating heat.

The 3000S interior copies that of its fixed-lid sibling, even if the repositioning of the instruments isn't ideal due to the primary gauges being out of the natural line of sight. Roofless it feels markedly less claustrophobic and reasonably spacious. On the move, there's a little scuttle shake, as you might expect, but none of the crashing and banging that usually goes with it. And for all the talk of the Taimar being less rigid than the M-series coupés, you'd never know. This impeccably restored example feels remarkably tight and together.

On smooth roads, presuming you can find any in the UK, both cars display polished manners, with a firm but not harsh ride thanks in part to compliant springing and the independent rear end. The mix of comfort and handling is near spot-on for a sports car; it's only when you misjudge a pothole that you can feel the odd graunch. With the open car in particular, it's easy to ground the exhaust because there's barely 2in of clearance.

Twisty roads are a joy in either car, with a neutral stance on entry into corners, gently shifting into mild oversteer on powering through. The rack-and-pinion steering is reasonably meaty and unswervingly accurate, with a fluidity of attitude that isn't robbed by power assistance. Over heavily rutted roads you can feel a little resonance through the wheel, but it's nothing to spoil your enjoyment.

Best of all is the Ford V6. Although not an overtly sporting unit, the cast-iron, overhead-valve Essex 3-litre offers a mellow backbeat and enough torque (172lb ft at 3000rpm) to pull you forward from near walking pace, regardless of gear, even if it does get a little breathless towards the upper reaches of the rev range. On the debit side, the Taimar's massively tall gearlever is positioned too far back to make comfortable use of the Capri four-speeder. In the S it's more stubby and the changes are positive enough, but in both you're forced to move your left shoulder back rather than simply flicking your wrist. The brakes could do with a little more initial bite, too.

TVRs from this period are far from perfect, but you wouldn't expect them to be. Neither car does anything exceptionally well, just more than well enough. They're perhaps a little raw for some tastes but exhilarating with it, being sports cars in the truest sense. And while the '70s strain may lack the Technicolor dazzle of more recent editions, there's none of their crass detailing and rudeboy posturing either. Just try to find something that offers as much amusement for the same money as a Taimar or 3000S. It might take a while.

Thanks to *the TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk)*

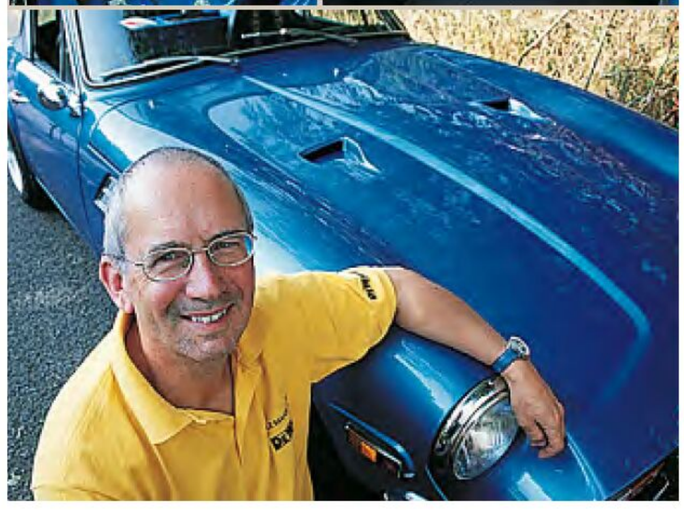
THE MISSING LINK

TVR's all-consuming drive for greater power is nothing new – witness the Griffith and Tuscan V8s during the 1960s. But while the Blackpool firm was busy experimenting with forced induction in the '70s with Broadspeed-built V6s, it wasn't altogether out of choice. It had wanted Rover's V8, but Morgan got first – and exclusive – dibs on the all-alloy classic. However, that didn't stop as many as 12 M-series cars disappearing out the back door to the closely affiliated Barnet Motor Company – less engine – for an 'aftermarket conversion'.

This car isn't one of them (none are known to survive), but a close facsimile. Belonging to TVR Car Club director Tony Connor, this metallic blue 1972 example began life as a Triumph-engined 2500M. He recalls: "I heard about the car last year after a guy wrote to me, suggesting an article about the conversion for the club magazine. I told him that if ever he sold the car, I'd love to have it. A few months later, he rang me up and said it was for sale. I bit his arm off."

With further suspension mods by Andy Larkins (a Ford Focus WRC engineer), it's the handling that grabs you. Running on trick Leda spring/damper units, the ride is hard, but the car turns in with real poise. There is negligible oversteer on exit, and acceleration from the mildly uprated 3.5-litre V8 is as immediate as it is vocal. Only the SD1-sourced gearbox, with its Sherpa van linkage extension, lets the side down, being difficult to engage in a hurry: a worry considering its planned future use in sprinting.

As an insight into a might-have-been, it's fascinating; that TVR could have been making good use of the Rover V8 a decade earlier than with the wedgy 350/390s. A pity, but not as much as the JAG of Ontario's Ford 302cu in V8-powered Taimar 5000. Again just 12 were built, having earlier disappeared out the back door...



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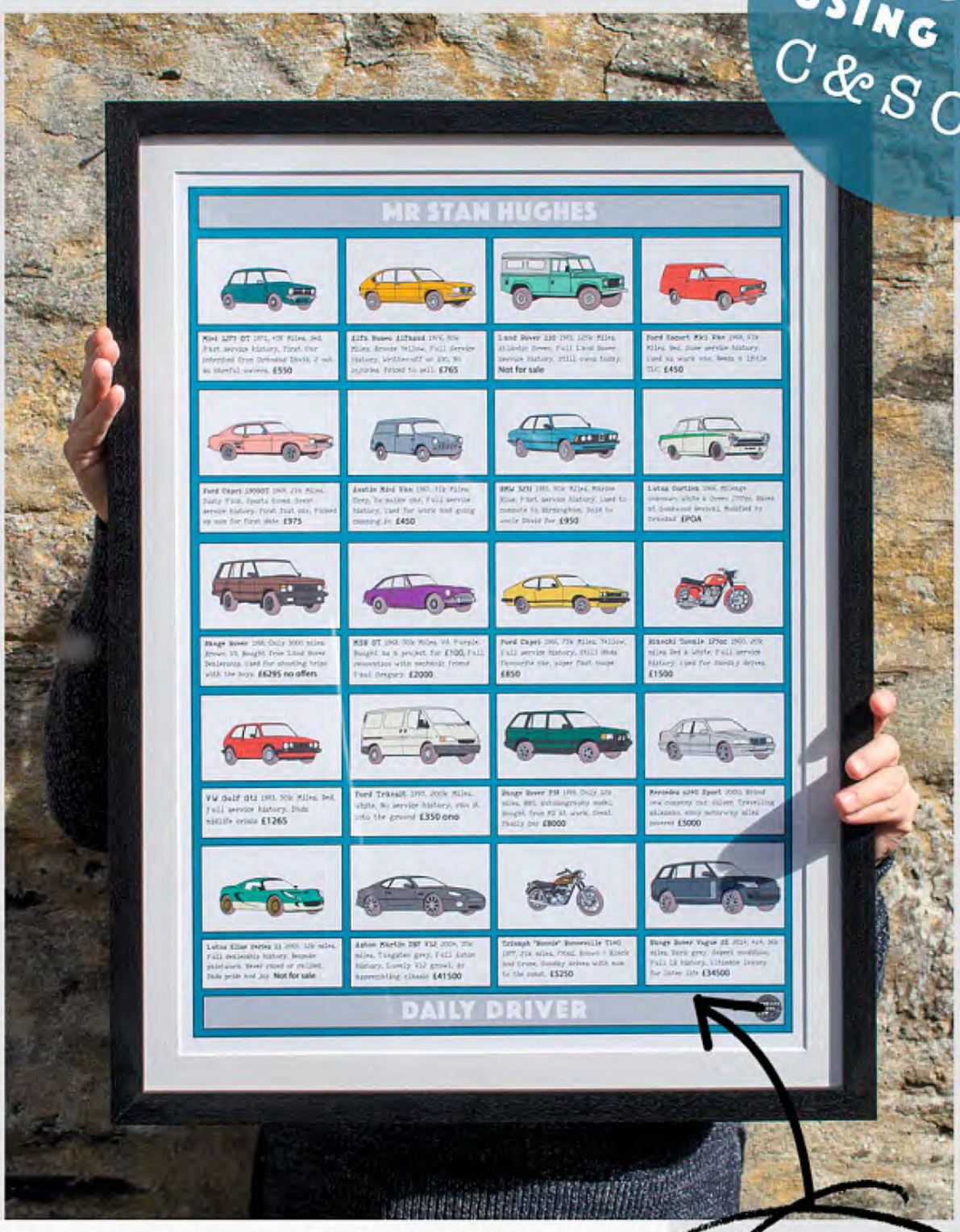

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For all our individual passions – the open-roofed obsessive, the tin-top advocate or the hot-hatchback hooligan – there's a little part of every enthusiast that fantasises about playing the young, wealthy playboy or it-girl. The paid-up member of the beautiful people who slings their skis in the back of the E-type for a wintry blast to the Alpine chalet, dodges the *gendarmes* on the midnight run to the south of France in the AC 428 for a weekend of debauchery, or loads up the DB Aston with a pair of 12-bores and a springer spaniel to cruise up to the Highlands in time for the Glorious Twelfth.

For most of us it will remain just that: a fantasy. Or perhaps not. In the '70s, wannabe rich-kids could choose from a selection of affordable – and patriotic – substitutes from the likes of MG, Triumph and TVR, and today they remain well within reach. But what are the essential ingredients of a true GT? A fixed roof (with optional Webasto), an elegant fastback shape, a plush cabin with two seats – or at best two plus a pair of sprog chairs in case your caddish ways lead to unplanned offspring. Oh, and lots of cylinders to give a sophisticated edge to the soundtrack: when crossing continents, it doesn't do to have a little four-banger wheezing away up front.

On paper, Triumph's diminutive GT6 appears to have it all. Forget the car's Spitfire origins, because this is a genuinely lovely, long-bonnet, tapering-tail coupé with a luxurious cabin – particularly for a car that undercut the four-cylinder MGB GT when new – and a great-sounding straight-six nestling beneath its pronounced bonnet bulge. The shape is

GT JUNIORS

Can those grand touring fantasies be lived out in miniature and on a budget? Triumph GT6, TVR Taimar and MGB GT V8 state their case

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

set off by simple, perforated steel wheels, frameless doors with delicate pull-handles and a muscular haunch over the rear wheels. Like the rest of the Triumph range, in 1970 Mk3 form the 1967 Giovanni Michelotti design was cleverly refreshed for the new decade with one-piece wraparound bumpers – raised at the front to give a more streamlined look – black plastic overriders and a sharper, Kamm-style tail. Try not to look too closely, though, because the classic 'baby E-type' profile is spoiled somewhat by the gawky wheel cambers – positive up front, negative to the rear – and fussy combination of creases, shutlines, lipped arches and wing-top finishers.

The convincing impression of a grown-up GT in miniature continues within. Ignore the cramped driving position and instead concentrate on the evocative view. A leather-rimmed, alloy-spoked wheel fronts Smiths instruments recessed into a slab of very '70s matt-finish timber, complete with neat cutout for your passenger's knees, and through the shallow 'screen there are the three peaks of wing-tops and big power bulge. The motor it covers may be a couple of cubic centimetres shy of 2 litres, but you wouldn't know it from the noise: it's the kind of cultured straight-six thrum so beloved by generations of Jaguar and Aston Martin owners. Redlined at 6000rpm, its best work has been done by two-thirds of that figure – and in overdrive top that's enough for a few extra points on your licence.

No, the engine isn't the limiting factor of the GT6's performance. That role is taken by the Herald-sourced separate chassis. On a bumpy road it rattles, skips and shakes its way from corner to corner. Being built after February 1973, this late example boasts the tamer 'swing-

'With less rubber on the road, you won't be able to keep up with your more powerful rivals cross-country, but you'll have a lot of fun trying'

TRIUMPH GT6 Mk3

Sold/number built 1970-'74/13,042
Construction steel backbone chassis with box-section side members, steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 1998cc straight-six, twin Zenith-Stromberg carburettors (SUs on this car)
Max power 104bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 117lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive on third and top, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** swing axles, transverse leaf spring; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes front discs, rear drums, with servo
Length 12ft 5in (3785mm)
Width 4ft 10½in (1486mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1194mm)
Wheelbase 6ft 11in (2108mm)
Weight 2030lb (921kg)
0-60mph 10 secs
Top speed 111mph **Mpg** 29.6
Price new £1353 (1973)

TRIUMPH GT6 TIM ANDREWS

Tim Andrews' GT6 arrived after he passed his test in 2005, but it's not what he set out to buy. He says: "I was looking for a Spitfire because I didn't think I could insure a GT6, then I found this on eBay and thought 'why not?'." Bought sight-unseen, the Triumph soon became a real restoration project. "It had appalling paint, the floorpans needed welding and the fuel system had to be flushed because the previous owner had put diesel in," recalls Tim. "I did the paint myself – outdoors! My dad has a compressor for model-making and this was the next size up." The appeal is easy to sum up: "It looks great, sounds great and is pretty quick – it's just so much fun, even when it goes wrong." A move to university means the GT6 has to go, but Tim vows to replace it: "Part of the fun is the rebuild – if I had the time, space and cash, I'd buy another project now."

Clockwise from top: GT6 turns in sharply, but lacks outright grip; 'six' has a cultured thrum; evocative view; simple steels; black plastic overriders

spring' independent rear suspension, but it still attacks corners in bite-sized chunks, and swift progress requires a fair amount of input from behind the wheel. With less rubber on the road you won't be able to keep up with your gruntier rivals, but accept that and you will have a lot of fun trying.

For the newcomer to the baby GT world the Triumph makes sense. The separate chassis might not make it the most refined tourer, but it's simple to work on and, with more than 40,000 GT6s made over a six-year production run, there are plenty to choose from.

That's not a statement that applies to the TVR Taimar. Just 395 were built before it made way for the wedge in 1979. Add the mechanically identical 3000M and that number swells to a healthier 1049, but what good is sweeping up to the doors of Monaco's Hôtel Hermitage in style if you then have to wrestle your bags out between the front seats? No, it was the arrival in 1976 of TVR's first tailgate – opened electrically by a button on the driver's B-pillar – that endowed the Taimar with GT status.

And it was added without damaging the attractive rear styling of the 1972 M-series, the first clean-sheet model since father-and-son team Arthur and Martin Lilley took the reins at TVR in summer 1965. Although clearly an all-new design for a new generation, the Taimar manages to retain the character of the first 'production' TVR, the Grantura, with its short doors and squat, aggressive stance. It's not pretty, but it is purposeful with its attractively sculpted front clamshell and largely unadorned lines. Any doubts that you're being thrown back to the 1970s are dispelled the moment you clap eyes on the two-tone, gold-and-brown paint-job – set off by the obligatory Wolfrace alloy wheels.

The narrow door aperture, a hangover from TVR's past, makes climbing aboard a pain for lankier drivers, but, once ensconced behind the uncomfortably low-set wheel, it's a fairly spacious cabin. Well finished, too – superbly so by TVR standards. The period feel continues with oatmeal vinyl everywhere: it's on the seats, the roof, the doors, even the padded dashboard. Unexpectedly, it all feels very together, with the switchgear and instruments all logically placed. There is some confusion until you become familiar with the Taimar – it takes concentration to avoid mixing up the gearlever and handbrake, which sticks up vertically from the central tunnel in arguably a more intuitive position than the cranked shifter.

Still, it's the loosest and fastest gearchange of the three – not that you need to use it very often. There's Jaguar XK-like flexibility to the 2994cc Essex Ford V6, the engine of choice for low-volume British car-builders Gilbern, Reliant, Ginetta and, of course, TVR. Barely 30lb heavier than the GT6, but with an extra 55lb ft, it is torquey enough to pull with reasonable vigour from walking pace in top gear to well past the legal limit – the slightly tuneless low-rpm roar transforming into a hearty musical boom as the revs rise.

TVR TAIMAR

Sold/number built 1976-'79/395
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 2994cc V6, twin-choke Weber carburettor
Max power 142bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 172lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 12ft 11in (3937mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1626mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2063lb (936kg)
0-60mph 8 secs
Top speed 125mph **Mpg** 20-25
Price new £6223 (1978)

Taimar's profile is purposeful

TVR TAIMAR
CHARLES HAYES

A TVR appears an unusual replacement for an Series IIA Land-Rover, but it made sense to Charles Hayes. "I was at university and wanted an inexpensive sports car," he says. "I went through *C&SC* and TVRs looked good value, so I joined the club and the Taimar was the right vintage – we were both born in 1978!" For seven years it has been his only car, and Charles is still smitten: "It has an appeal you never grow out of. It's quirky, people often don't know what it is, and its simple engineering allows me to work on it myself. I love the 1970s colour, plus the roar of the V6 is magical." Charles now has to sell the TVR to pay for his forthcoming honeymoon, but he sees the irony: "People told me it would be unreliable, but it's only broken down once and I fixed it at the roadside. It would have been perfect for driving around Italy – now we'll have to hire an Alfa and break down all the way!"

'With that torqey motor, the MG does a passable impression of American V8-powered continent-crossers'

Clockwise: TVR cabin is well laid out; Ford V6 with spare wheel ahead; foam-rubber quarter bumper; very '70s Wolfrace rims

MGB GT V8

Sold/number built 1973-'76/2591
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, ohv 3528cc V8, twin SU carburettors
Max power 137bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 193lb ft @ 2900rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive on top, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by lower wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs; lever-arm dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 12ft 10¾in (3931mm)
Width 5ft (1524mm)
Height 4ft 2in (1270mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 7in (2314mm)
Weight 2427lb (1101kg)
0-60mph 7.7 secs
Top speed 122mph **Mpg** 21
Price new £2310.88 (1974)

Get that engine on song and you can start to exploit the Mike Bigland-designed chassis. TVR has long suffered in comparison with Norfolk-based rival Lotus, but in this company the Taimar's tubular backbone chassis with independent wishbones and coils at each corner looks pretty racy. And so it proves, remaining composed and impressively neutral at the kind of speeds it's safe to achieve on the road, with balance tending towards oversteer – but not in the tyre-smoking, wrist-snapping mould of its lairier successors. You do have to take care when pressing on – it's a bumpy ride and the exhaust hovers only a few inches off the deck – and the steering, though sharp on turn-in, is low-geared and lacks feel so you can find yourself suddenly having to wind on a bit more lock mid-corner.

Nevertheless, with a stylish cabin, distinctive exterior and excellent handling, surely it's job done? Not quite. The Taimar's GT credentials fall down at the final – and most important – hurdle: the motorway. At these speeds, the knobbly ride is irritating while the rev-shy V6 is downright intrusive. With short gearing and no overdrive to supplement its four ratios, a 70mph cruise requires an ear-bashing 3500rpm. It's easy to imagine how frustrating it must have been for TVR that Morgan got there first with an exclusive deal for the under-stressed Rover V8 – you sense it's an engine that would transform the Taimar. But it's hardly surprising that British Leyland kept its trump card close to its chest – it had a rather famous sporting brand of its own to support.

Not that it hurried the Buick-derived compact V8 into its mainstream sports car. When the MGB GT V8 (unlike the Costello conversions that preceded it, the factory model was only available with a lid) finally arrived in 1973, the B had been on sale for more than a decade and was already seen as somewhat archaic by the motoring press. For GT fans, it's no disability that the V8 only came in tin-top form because the Pininfarina-influenced coupé, launched in 1965, is arguably prettier than its open sibling, if a little tall beside its sleek rivals here. Unfortunately for show-offs, only discreet V8 badging and the handsome Dunlop composite wheels distinguish the hottest GT from lowlier versions.

Like the standard car, it's roomy and well-appointed. Generous footwells and headroom mean there's no height limit on this ride, and the attractive, crackle-black dash gives a traditional feel. You do sit oddly high on the V8's tall suspension, but the payoff is a supple ride, with every bump that jars the TVR and Triumph soaked up unnoticed by the MG.

The 2912cc straight-six-powered MGC of 1967 weighed a horrifying 450lb heavier than the basic B – all of it in the nose, with inevitable handling consequences. But the all-alloy 3.5 is little heftier than the iron four-banger, and it finally brought the power to properly exploit the well-sorted monocoque chassis.

If you're expecting a Can-Am screamer, you'll be disappointed. But you shouldn't be, because the low-compression, Range Rover-spec unit is a relaxing companion. Pull the column stalk to engage overdrive – on top only – and it'll stride along at the legal limit pulling just 2500rpm, with only the pronounced wind noise marring the sense of effortless progress. The MG's heft means it doesn't feel quite as punchy from low revs as the lightweight TVR, but the V8 sounds fantastic – even better from within, unlike the six-pot pair which seem to have been tuned for the benefit of onlookers rather than drivers.

The relatively unsophisticated wishbone front/leaf-sprung rear is given a workout by the V8's 137bhp. The steering is fairly light until you start to get enthusiastic, when it rapidly loads up mid-corner and you have to muscle the MG through tighter curves. It's no tail-happy hero either, at least in the dry, tending towards safe, predictable understeer, but it's still far better to drive than the C or dreadful B-caricature RV8 of 1992. But then the GT V8 isn't about being doorhandled on track days; with that torquey motor, generous glazing and exceptional comfort, the MG does a passable impression of those American V8-powered continent-crossers from the likes of Jensen, Bristol or Gordon-Keeble.

Alongside a baby E-type and a scaled-down Interceptor, the Taimar is something of an anomaly: it's not trying to be anything. It might be the most grown-up and reserved member of the TVR family, but in the company of these young adults it's the rebellious teen. It's the most agile handler of the trio – as demonstrated by the various transient-equine chicanes encountered in the New Forest – but it's more sports car than grand tourer. At rest, the GT6 best mimics the aspirational GT and, with the most authentic soundtrack of the trio, it's certainly capable of punching well above its weight. But the illusion is shattered on the move by the separate-chassis shudder.

Which leaves the MG. It's not the prettiest, nor the fastest from A to B along a twisty B-road. But in GT world Point A and Point B are in different countries and none in this group – let alone many full-sized and far more expensive GTs – can touch the V8. It may have been considered a dinosaur when new, but for today's enthusiasts it's well worth digging up. Now, where did I leave those Purdeys and the picnic hamper? CLASSIC

Thanks to *the MG Car Club (01235 555552; mgcc.co.uk)*

Clockwise from far left: V8 makes a relaxed tourer; reprofiled engine bay adopted by all Bs; handsome Dunlop steel/alloy rims; familiar details; traditional feel inside

MGB GT V8 MALCOLM BAILEY

Malcolm Bailey's MG was bought two years ago, and it's his first classic. He says: "I used to be into customising – I had a V8-powered Bedford CF and an Austin Sheerline hearse with side pipes – and wanted to start going to shows again." His buying criteria were simple: "It had to be a V8 and preferably a sports car – this was the obvious choice. Tigers and SP250s are okay, but their engines are heavy so the handling suffers." Bought online, the MG has so far been faultless. "The power and the sound are the best things," he adds. "If I had a 10-car garage there are others I would add, but I can't see this going."

Malcolm has become an enthusiastic member of the MG family. "I'm webmaster for the Abingdon Works Centre of the MG Car Club, and I'm revamping the main club website," he says. "I'm also in the MG Owners' Club and have just bought a ZS180 for work – I couldn't resist!"

“I liked it so much, I bought the company”

Four years after acquiring this car, Peter Wheeler had become a motor manufacturer. His rare Taimar Turbo is as seductive as TVRs come

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

TVR
VFA 539S

Turbo is not for the shy. Launch of the Taimar hatchback in 1976 gave the M-series some genuine practicality

Remember those cheesy TV ads for Remington electric shavers, with perma-tanned, ceramic-toothed boss Victor Kiam? You wouldn't think that the over-groomed millionaire would have much in common with TVR's lanky, chain-smoking, moustachioed saviour Peter Wheeler, yet both men came by the firms that made their names in the same way.

The product that turned Wheeler from enthusiastic car owner into inspirational car manufacturer is the piece of plastic sculpture you see here, registered on 1 August 1977 as a company car for his firm, ETA Processing and Effluent Plant. He became a regular sight at Bristol Avenue as he returned for upgrades and servicing. "He was a perfectionist and was in and out of the factory, eternally developing the car," says Adrian Venn, a leading expert on the model. "The engine in it is immaculate – all of the casting marks have been dressed, it's completely different from all of the other Turbos. When the units were supplied, the pistons were all plus or minus half an ounce; in Peter's car they were all within a gram of each other. That was almost unheard of in 1979."

Within just four years, Wheeler's passion for chassis 3961FM – not to mention the Tasmin he bought straight after the model's launch in 1980 – led him to abandon his plans of settling down in a castle in Scotland and instead take a major shareholding in the Blackpool car-maker, installing himself in the chairman's chair.

Put aside its famous ownership and this is still a seriously important TVR. Hell, it's a seriously important British car: long before the likes of Lotus and Leyland discovered forced induction, this was the first UK production model to be offered with a turbocharger; a bales-and-twine special from Blackpool that could out-accelerate a Porsche 911 turbo through the gears. That TVR was in a position to offer such a car says an awful lot about the man from whom Wheeler took over the company reins, Martin Lilley, who (with the help of his dad, Arthur) had bought the assets of Grantura Engineering from the Receiver in November '65.

During Lilley's 16-year custodianship, the rejuvenated TVR Engineering would move from being a glorified kit-car maker into a *bona fide* sports-car brand, if not mainstream then at least sufficiently well-known to headline motor show reports in the press – helped by the PR-savvy Lilley's brainwave of getting naked models to pose with his cars. A fresh factory followed, then new cars, spearheaded by the M-series from 1972. Available with Ford 'four' (1600M), Triumph straight-six (2500M) or Ford V6 (3000M) power, here was the first TVR to appear to have been actually designed, rather than being presented as a happy accident via the combination of its component parts.

The car that would tip TVR back into the junior supercar league – from which it had been notably absent since the demise of the Tuscan V8 – rose in 1975 from the ashes of a factory fire that could have killed the company. Just months later, the 3000M Turbo was launched at the Earls Court Motor Show in 1975. Yes, 1975; it's best to be reminded of that before you see the figures: 230bhp, 273lb ft, 0-60mph in 5.8 secs and just shy of 140mph. None too shabby for the likes of Ferrari or Porsche, let alone a little outfit living in the shadow of Blackpool Tower.

Not that this was all TVR's own work. Famed tuner Ralph Broad developed the installation with an adapted truck turbocharger for the 3-litre Ford Essex V6 and offered it through his Broadspeed concern as the 'Bullit' upgrade for the Ford Capri. For the blown 3000M, the 2994cc unit was blueprinted and balanced, but, rather than go for the complexity of a modern fuel injection system, the downdraught Weber carburettor was pressurised, with the turbocharger mounted down low beneath the crossmember and running at 9psi. In an effort to prevent the engines going pop, the compression ratio was reduced to a less stressed 8:1, and an oil cooler was added.

Wheeler wasn't a particularly early adopter,

but when the wraps were taken off the Taimar hatchback at Earls Court a year later, it too was turbocharged, and he snapped up the seventh car off the line (for a whopping £2000 more than a standard Taimar). No wonder it appealed to Lancashire's answer to Colin Chapman: the Turbo epitomised Wheeler's oft-quoted mantra regarding his vehicles: "I can't see the point of sports cars unless they're fast."

And fast it most certainly was: quick enough to garner some pretty impressive soundbites in the motoring press. 'Now [TVR] harbours a genuine rival for some of the established products of Modena and Stuttgart,' enthused *Motor*. Not all reviews were entirely glowing, however: some pointed out how tricky the powerful, short-wheelbase coupé could be on the limit, particularly in the wet. The original show car had been crashed within weeks of its debut, and it certainly wasn't the only one.

The last thing we need, then, is the torrential rain that douses us as we arrive at the storage facility where Amos Roney keeps the star of his TVR collection. "TVRs are all about being different," says quantity surveyor Amos, who has turned a passion for the marque into a business. He is quick to point out, however, that the Turbo – along with an ex-Wheeler 420SEAC that he also owns – is not for sale.

We're understandably circumspect as the long nose of the Taimar Turbo edges out on to the April-showered roads, but at first it's hard to see what all the fuss was about. As Adrian explains, those explosive performance figures were set using the five-star fuel that is now a distant memory. "It wasn't developed and it didn't work properly," he adds. "It was designed around five-star, and to run it on four-star you need to alter the timing or add a boost-retard, otherwise it's a time-bomb in the front."

Oatmeal trim originally had brown carpet; note vertical lever of T5 'box, rather than cranked four-speed

Wolfrace alloys replace original T-slots

To a large extent, the torque of the chunky 3-litre V6 helps to mask the lag, but the turbocharger doesn't really wake up before 2700rpm so until then the performance matches that of a normally aspirated Taimar. It's also refined, the turbocharger muting much of the Essex V6's rumble, and adding its own rather pleasing descant of whooshes and whistles, with a discreet cough from the wastegate as you lift off.

When Adrian restored this car in 1999-2000 for its then-owner, a TVR-loving priest, it gained a Borg-Warner T5 five-speed manual gearbox. Aside from its slightly awkward positioning, far back on the transmission tunnel (the lever of the original four-speed was cranked forwards to site it more naturally), it's a revelation: fast and slick, with ratios ideally spaced to exploit the performance. Standing starts are pointless in these conditions, so it's best to get through first and second and into third for the main event: plant it in this cog at 30mph, wait for the blower to spool up and suddenly you're nudging three figures, enjoying a massive punch in the back just when the original engine would have been getting breathless. That stonking pull right up to the 5500rpm power peak soon becomes addictive, flinging the little coupé from corner to corner in a manner that makes the factory's 12.5 secs 0-100mph claim seem entirely believable.

When you get to those corners, it doesn't all fall apart as reputation would have you believe. The Mike Bigland-designed M-series chassis, a tubular backbone with outriggers to support the glassfibre body, was the first from TVR to be series-built on a jig for precision, making the most of the Triumph front suspension (on bespoke wishbones). There's little roll and it feels well-balanced and grippy – neutral, even – but you do watch your throttle applications through bends to avoid bringing all of that boost in at the wrong time. The tiny three-spoke wheel, mounted knuckle-grazingly close to the dashboard, accentuates the weight of the steering at low speeds, but once on the move it lightens enough so you don't need to be Hulk Hogan to hustle it along. The Triumph GT6 rack offers a slightly frustrating mixture of too little feel and too much kickback, making the lanes around Duxford feel a lot more rutted than they actually are as it writhes around in your hands.

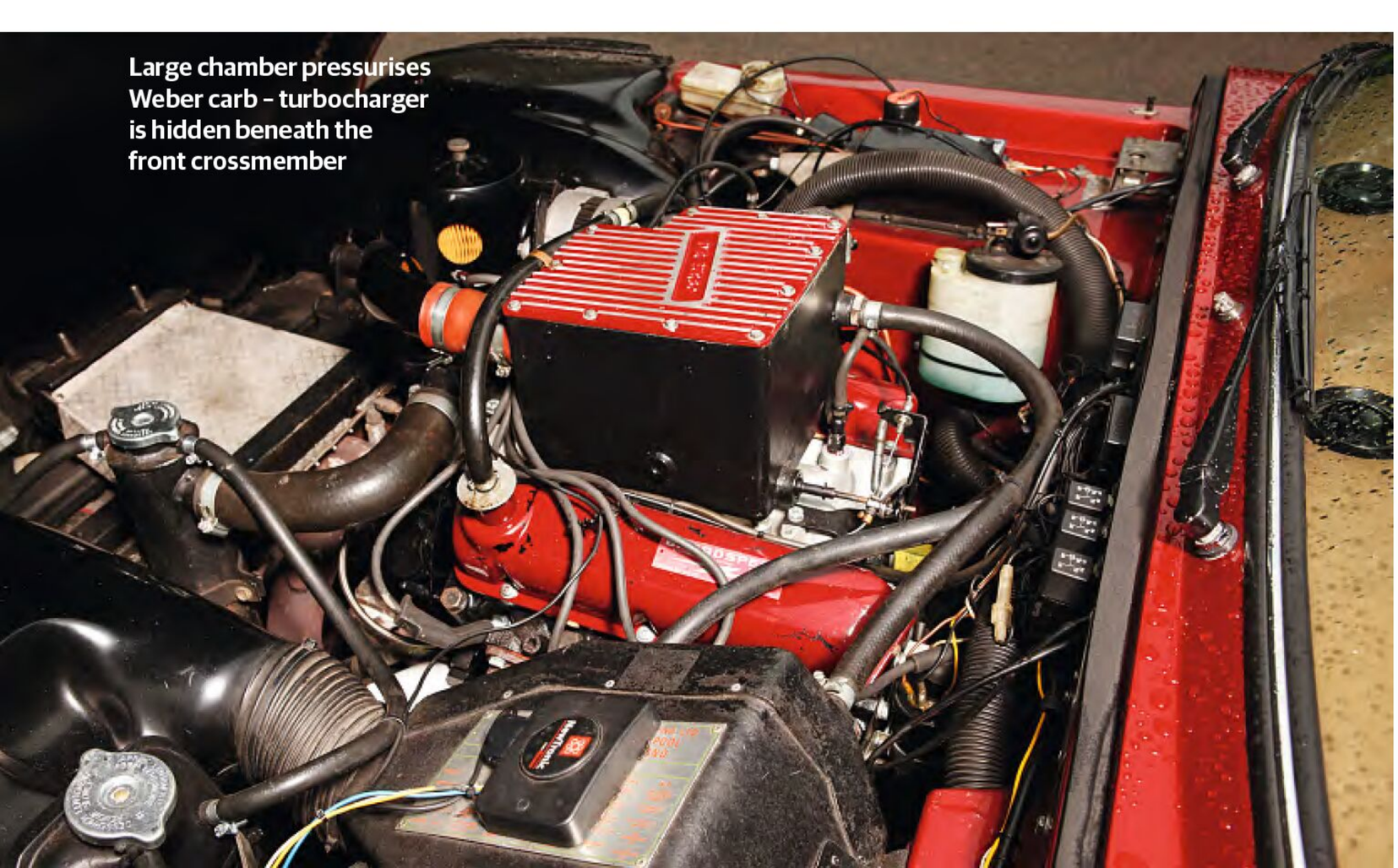
TVR TURBO

Sold/number built 1975-'79/63 (30 Taimars, 20 3000Ms, 13 Convertibles)
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 2994cc V6, twin-choke Weber carburettor and Holset or Garrett AIResearch turbocharger
Max power 230bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 273lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD; optional limited-slip differential
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 12ft 11in (3937mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1626mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1194mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2308lb (1047kg)
0-60mph 5.8 secs
Top speed 139mph **Mpg** 17.7
Price new £6900 (1978)

But you soon get into a groove, enjoying its smooth accuracy and leaning on the slightly wooden middle pedal to feel the benefit of this car's uprated Wilwood four-pot calipers, then powering out and trying not to trouble the limited-slip diff: this was among the first to run a Jaguar back axle in place of the old TR6 item.

The Taimar's surprising smoothness allows you a pause to take in the interior, which all seems very, er, TVR: it's a feast of Oatmeal vinyl and leather, much of it padded and not all stuck down properly. There's a useful cubbyhole in the centre console, a huge boot behind and ahead a dashboard so well-stocked that the boost gauge has been sited – rather less usefully – ahead of the passenger. Obvious parts-bin raids aside, however, it feels like a proper production car – and it was, with kit versions having been unavailable since 1972. It's far less cramped than early TVRs but still hardly generous – and it must have been pretty snug for the 6ft 6in Wheeler, grazing his head against the standard (and tiny) Webasto roof.

That didn't stop him enjoying fond memories of the Taimar Turbo, which he concluded was "a fantastic car, very underrated at the time". Oddly, it still is: few today realise the importance of this shortlived model, which survived for just three years and contributed a mere 63 cars to the M-series' 2402 total. Yet this practical trendsetter exploited the potential of pioneering technology long before the 1980s turbo revolution, and it remains a dramatic-looking period piece with those wonderfully unsubtle 'Turbo' decals. No wonder good cars are now finally being properly prized – and priced – by enthusiasts.


Large chamber pressurises Weber carb – turbocharger is hidden beneath the front crossmember

Thanks to *AC Roney Sports Cars (07968 624949; acroney.com)*

PETER ROBERT WHEELER, 1944-2009

The story of TVR is as much about three men as the cars; well, four if you count Nikolai Smolenski, but perhaps we'll gloss over the unseen leader responsible for the firm's slide into obscurity. First was Trevor Wilkinson, founder and creator of the brand, using three letters from his name; then Martin Lilley, who gave TVR real stability; and Peter Wheeler, the man who distilled and perfected the charisma that would come to define the marque.

Wheeler was the perfect man to lead TVR into the '80s. He may have been a chemical engineer by training, but, as a keen owner, he knew what buyers wanted: power and noise. And he gave it to them. Wheeler's genius mated the Tasmin with the Rover V8 for the 350i, initiating a dynasty of wedges that would peak with the 165mph 420SEAC of 1986. At the same time, he launched the entry-level S, which owed more than a little to his beloved M-series. Ever hands-on, Wheeler was involved in everything from styling to engineering TVR's own six-, eight- and 12-cylinder engines. He was singular in his vision, too: his decision to eschew driver and safety aids – even ABS and airbags – often earned criticism.

'TVR was run to make stunning cars and delight its fans, not make pots of money'

Throughout, it was clear that TVR was run to make stunning cars and delight its fans, rather than make pots of money. From the 1990 debut of the Griffith came a stream of new models – Cerbera, Tuscan, Tamora, T350, Sagaris and Typhon – while away from the factory, Wheeler launched (and competed in) the Tuscan Challenge race series and oversaw TVR's return to Le Mans. Even after selling in July 2004, he remained a true enthusiast, creating an amphibious vehicle, racing an Aston DB4 and building his idea of the ultimate M-series, the 5000M. "He was passionate, but also quiet and unassuming," says M-series guru Adrian Venn. "I worked on the Cerbera racer for TVR and wasn't paid for 18 months; when I saw Peter at the Motor Show and he found out, he got out his chequebook there and then. He was a genuine bloke."

Hits of the ’70s

Sports cars were a dying breed during the 1970s. This diverse quintet survived the cull

WORDS **RUSS SMITH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

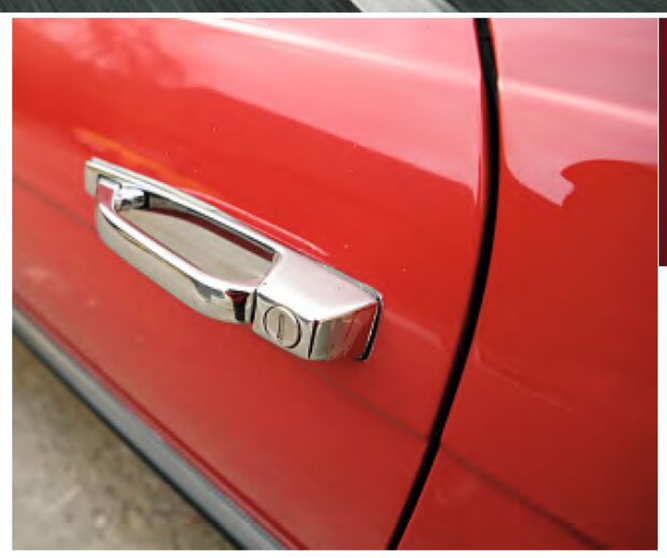
'The Mercedes negotiates country lanes with an ease that belies its appearance and weight'

The 1970s was not a golden era for open sports cars. Today, with a limited budget and the desire for at least 2 litres to play with, the five cars you see before you are pretty much all that's on offer if you're fond of popping Abba or Led Zeppelin into your concealed CD player and want a car to match those nostalgic longings. Even then, the Porsche 914/6 is only in by the chrome of its bumper, because prices are starting to disappear over the horizon – especially in Europe. You would have to take your chances with an American-sourced car, doubtless with a non-original engine, to qualify as a budget buy – unless you're willing to put up with a wheezing, Volkswagen-sourced 'four'.

In further faint damnation of that decade of lost ways, each of the cars here actually has its roots in the 1960s. But whereas some are mere survivors of a glorious past, others provide a hint of what was to come in the heady, post-MX-5 sports-car era we enjoy today.

Thankfully for '70s fans, this famous five consists of cars that are not only good, but also interesting and diverse. For starters, and purely by chance, each has a distinct engine layout:

Torquey V8 is needed to haul the SL's hefty 3404lb



Clockwise from top: delicacy of 'Pagoda' is gone, but R107 SL is handsome; steel wheel with elegant hubcap; famous crest; chunky handle

MERCEDES-BENZ 350SL

Sold/number built 1971-'80/15,304
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 3499cc V8, Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection
Max power 200bhp @ 5800rpm
Max torque 211lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission four-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** swing axles; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted recirculating ball
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 14ft 5in (4390mm)
Width 5ft 10½in (1791mm)
Height 4ft 3in (1300mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 1in (2464mm)
Weight 3404lb (1547kg)
0-60mph 9.3 secs
Top speed 127mph **Mpg** 18
Price new £5622

DAVE KING

Dave King's 350SL is his first classic and was a retirement present from his wife. "I had wanted one since I was a youth," he explains. "Now we have tested the car out properly, we're driving it to Barcelona in the spring." The Benz arrived a year ago, bought sight-unseen via eBay for an excellent price. The gamble paid off: the only bill so far in 3000 miles of motoring has been a £200 rear-brake rebuild.

four conventional cylinders for the Alfa Romeo, a straight-six in the TR, Ford's V6 in the TVR, Porsche's legendary flat-six in the 914/6 and a thumping V8 in the Mercedes.

Ah yes, the Mercedes. There are those who might question the SL's inclusion. Certainly, *Motor* announced 'The 350SL is no sports car' in its original test. But that was in 1971, when memories of Austin-Healeys, loud exhausts and zero suspension travel were still fresh in the mind. Besides, our perceptions of the genre were changed by the 1990s sports-car revival, alongside many of which the once too-refined SL is a positive clubhammer.

A pumped-up, more aggressive evolution of the '60s Pagoda SLs, the R107 is undoubtedly smooth. But it's not soft, and only narrowly does it come out as the most comfortable car here. It changes direction and negotiates country lanes with an ease and enthusiasm that belies its appearance and weight. It carries at least 1000lb more than any of the others here, but you don't feel it. Granted, it uses all of the V8's additional punch to keep pace with the lightweights, but that muscle gives power on demand anywhere in the rev range. And the brakes are incredible, so you can leave their application as late as you like.

All of which would be wonderfully enjoyable were it not for that immense steering wheel, the diameter of which also puts the point of rotation a fair distance from your lap. The classic ten-to-two is a long reach for the less-

Benz cabin is bland but superbly built

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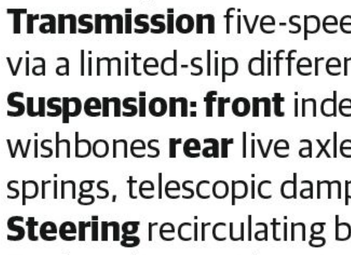
than-statuesque driver. It's hardly the most inspiring cockpit to sit in, either, being predominantly black, bland and functional. There are as many big eyeball air vents as there are gauges. But if you can live with that, you'll do so safe in the knowledge that all controls and materials are of the highest quality.

You can never quite allow yourself that same confidence in an Alfa Romeo, but enthusiasts are predisposed to forgive all manner of sins in Italian cars for the sake of the driving experience. On paper, the Spider ought to be outclassed in this company: it has the equal smallest engine, fewest cylinders and lowest price. That it isn't left behind at all is testament to the glorious twin-cam, which goads you into playing with its racy rasp, and the way the whole car comes to life in your hands. You want to drive the Alfa quickly, and you can do so with little practice. It feels instantly familiar and

Clockwise from above: textures and wood-rim wheel lift the black cabin; rasping twin-cam 'four'; pretty detailing; elegant steels

ALFA ROMEO SPIDER 2000

Sold/number built 1971-'82/38,379
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, dohc 1962cc 'four', twin Weber 40DCOE carburettors
Max power 132bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 134lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD via a limited-slip differential
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones **rear** live axle, trailing arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering recirculating ball
Brakes discs, with twin servos
Length 13ft 6in (4120mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1631mm)
Height 4ft 2in (1290mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 5in (2250mm)
Weight 2245lb (1019kg)
0-60mph 8.8 secs
Top speed 119mph **Mpg** 25
Price new £2439



NEIL POWELL

Graphic designer Neil Powell has owned this Spider for 10 years and still uses it two or three times a week – rather more than the Ferrari Dino he also owns. "The body hasn't been touched because I Waxoyled it to death before using the car," he smiles. "I've replaced the hood and clutch, but since the bugs were ironed out it's been fantastically reliable. All it has needed for the past three years is servicing."

TVR 3000S

Sold/number built 1978-'79/258
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-iron, ohv 2994cc V6, twin-choke Weber carburettor
Max power 142bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 172lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 12ft 11in (3937mm)
Width 5ft 4in (1626mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1194mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2335lb (1060kg)
0-60mph 7.7 secs
Top speed 125mph **Mpg** 24
Price new £6390

CLIVE WESTMACOTT

After six years behind the wheel, Clive Westmacott still hasn't tired of the delights his regularly used TVR offers. "There's nothing better than a blast through the Wiltshire countryside with the top down when it's cold," he says. "The car is largely original and could do with some restoration, but the chassis is sound enough and I don't want to be without it for six months or more!"

Clockwise from top: sporty feel inside; Ford motor; Cobra Supaslot rims; TVR comes from founder Trevor Wilkinson's name; Ford handles. Below: sleek and uncluttered lines with the hood down

inspires confidence – even if, like me, you haven't driven one for 10 years. There is a beautiful balance and finesse to the handling that always has you eager for the next bend.

The driving position is better than I had remembered, too. Yes, those floor-hinged pedals are a little close and funny-feeling at first, but you soon adapt – especially if there are Minors or Beetles in your past. The gearlever looks strange, protruding from the upright face of the console, but it is intuitively placed and shifts through its five ratios beautifully – although it does knock the steering wheel when you flick it into reverse.

The Alfa Romeo stands as the prettiest car here, despite the stylistically backward step of that square-cut Kamm tail, introduced for the 1970s to improve aerodynamics. It takes a little away from Pininfarina's delicate sculpture, but makes the Series 2 Alfa look more of its era. The prettiness continues inside, where the overall blackness is disguised by the use of texture and shape, and broken up by plenty of stylish chrome detailing. The icing sugar on this particular *Panettone Milanese* is the deep-dish Personal steering wheel, which feels as good as it looks and delivers every gram of feedback from the front wheels.

You would struggle to call the TVR pretty, particularly with those scooped-out door-tops, but the cut-down Jensen-Healey 'screen and long nose do lend it an air of aggressive purpose. That commanding road presence explains how it manages to be 7in shorter than the Alfa Romeo without looking like it. The alloy wheels mark its place in time: Cobra Supaslots are as firmly late-'70s as Punk and the dawn of Maggie Thatcher's handbag.

'The TVR might merely be a Taimar without a roof, but it is a complete and capable package – not the rattling brute of bar-room legend'

The visual promise is backed up by the sheer clout of the torquey Ford Essex V6. The TVR is clearly the quickest car here, and that engine delivers in a way that brings an involuntary smile to your face. Owner Clive Westmacott caught me doing it, well aware of the phenomenon that occurs every time you push the throttle pedal more than an inch.

The 3000S is more than a one-thrill Blackpool funfair ride, though. It surprises by feeling much more solid and well screwed together than you expect. In concept this might merely be a Taimar without a roof, but the end result is a really complete and capable package – not the rattling, creaking brute of bar-room legend. Well-judged spring and damper rates give you sportily firm suspension without discomfort, and there is only the merest hint of scuttle shake on bumpier surfaces. Plus much fun can be had by kicking the tail into oversteer on tighter corners and catching it with the accurate and fluid steering.

The snug and unremittingly black cockpit is a bit make-do in places, as you might expect from a low-volume specialist manufacturer, but the biggest downside is the position of the gearlever. It's sited too far back and falls to wrist rather than to hand, so changes are born out of thought rather than instinct. But at least the V6's abundant power reduces the number of shifts you need to make.

You can make no criticism of Triumph's TR6 in this area: the gearlever and all other main controls are ideally placed. And, although some might prefer the convenience of a five-speed, the overdrive unit does make changes in an instant, fingertip switch-flick that you couldn't beat with a lever. This is a comfortable cabin, made lighter in this example by the non-standard pale timber of its dashboard. The brakes are good, and the steering nicely weighted and communicative, but the TR6 definitely feels the oldest of the bunch. It is, too, with a separate-chassis lineage that stretches back to the '50s. That will add to the TR's classic appeal for many – it provides the most raw driving experience – but it also offers a bouncy ride and a steering column that shudders in a marked manner over bumps.

Today we're at a bit of a disadvantage because we are not playing with a full-fat TR6, but an ex-USA car that's still on carbs rather than fuel injection, and it is not performing to the best of its abilities. It's a gentler, easier drive, but one that rather misses the point. The TR needs that edge, that brutality that makes the allegedly 150bhp versions something to wrestle with.

But even then it wouldn't hide the Triumph's dinosaur status. Karmann's breeze-block restyle might have dressed up the short-lived TR5 to look the part for the 1970s, but, like people, cars reveal their true age when the dancing starts. The Triumph would be the most tiring companion over a long journey, and you need real stamina to make those epic foreign trips of which TR owners are so fond.

In this company, the Porsche 914/6 looks to have been beamed down from another planet. Aside from the inescapably '70s and rather austere black vinyl interior, and the fact that it's a two-seater whose top comes off, there's little shared DNA with the others. That top is not even cloth, but a glassfibre panel that cleverly pops on to clips above your luggage in the boot.

For many, the separate-chassis 6 is the last of the 'real' TRs before the monocoque TR7

The 914 was conceived jointly by Porsche and Volkswagen, to provide the latter with something sporty to replace the Karmann Ghia – which the four-cylinder versions did pretty well – and for the former to lower the entry level into Porsche ownership. That second aim was less successful in part, because the 911T-engined 914/6 that we're testing here still came in at 50% more than the price of a Jaguar E-type. You had to really want to buy into the concept of a mid-engined 'racing car for the road' to pay that sort of premium.

The 914/6 might have been a sales flop, but it shouts '1970s' louder than Noddy Holder screaming "It's Christmas!" and is the fastest appreciating of our quintet. It's also the best handling, with light, precise steering. You do need time to learn to exploit it, because there's no clue to where the limit is – and, as in many mid-engined cars, you won't actually want to find it. The ride is firm yet smooth, which is a neat trick. It feels as if there's little travel, but you barely notice the bumps.

The engine's purposeful vibration at idle soon gives way to the familiar 911 sound of thin sheets of aluminium being fed into a sewing machine, just a bit closer to your ears than usual. In contrast to the others here, power only comes in higher up the rev range. It never kicks you in the back, but the longer you keep your right foot buried, the greater the reward.

At this juncture, I could try to draw an objective conclusion, but there would be little point. Simply choose the one that best suits your taste and personality, and you'll be very happy. You'll also find you have good reasons for dismissing the other four. Here are mine...

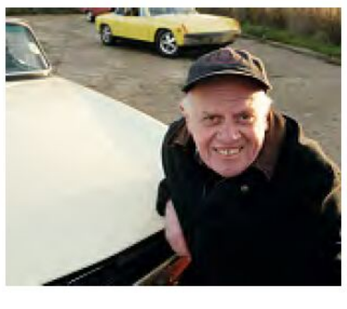
I found it intriguing, cleverly engineered and the most striking to look at, but the Porsche and I don't speak the same language. There's too little low-down power, too much of a race-car feel. It's the one I'd most like to take round Mallory Park, but not down the A151.

The Mercedes was so easy to drive, yet much more sporting than expected. It's just as good at playing hooligan as cruising comfortably all day. But all that weight pays an unavoidable

Clockwise from above: comfy cockpit with custom-made dash in Masur; lusty 'six' wears carbs in strangled US spec; classic British details carried over from TR4/5, which formed the basis for the 6; beefy steel wheels were standard fit

TRIUMPH TR6

Sold/number built 1968-'76/91,850
Construction steel chassis, steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 2498cc straight-six, twin SU carburettors (fuel injection in UK)
Max power 125bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 143lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, overdrive on top three ratios, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** semi-trailing arms, lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 13ft 3in (4039mm)
Width 4ft 10in (1473mm)
Height 4ft 2in (1270mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 4in (2235mm)
Weight 2475lb (1123kg)
0-60mph 10.7 secs
Top speed 121mph **Mpg** 22
Price new £1339



MIKE FLEET

Cabinet-maker Mike Fleet bought his TR6 for $200 from a scrapyard in Pennsylvania, USA, 14 years ago. During restoration it was returned to its original Carmine Red. "I hated that, so when the engine blew up in 2006, I took the body off and re-did it in Jasmine," he says. "It's lovely to drive – I always do 5000 miles a year." Mike made a new dashboard in Masur – a wood used in private jet interiors.

Clockwise from left: typically Germanic interior; mid-mounted flat-six from the 911T; proud moniker; simple door furniture; distinctive Fuchs rims

914/6 looks as if it's from a different generation – and in technical spec it is

PORSCHE 914/6

Sold/number built 1969-'73/3360
Construction steel monocoque with glassfibre roof panel
Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 1991cc flat-six, twin Weber carburettors
Max power 110bhp @ 5800rpm
Max torque 116lb ft @ 4200rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts, torsion bars **rear** semi-trailing arms, coil springs, telescopic dampers; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs
Length 13ft 1in (3985mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1778mm)
Height 4ft (1219mm)
Wheelbase 8ft (2449mm)
Weight 2195lb (997kg)
0-60mph 8.7 secs
Top speed 123mph **Mpg** 26
Price new £3475

MICK PACEY

Porsche specialist Mick Pacey had to search long and hard for an unmolested, matching-numbers 914/6. It came from America, where the car's restoration was featured in the Porsche magazine *Excellence*. "It's extremely original and complete, down to the toolkit and 'dogbone' footrest," says Mick. "I've owned numerous early Porsches, but the 914/6 is still one of the most enjoyable to drive."

'The purposeful vibration at idle soon gives way to the familiar 911 sound of thin sheets of aluminium being fed into a sewing machine'

price at the pumps, which would be hard to live with. There's nothing intrinsically wrong with the Triumph, either. A TR6 is a proper classic sports car, in most cases gifted with more power than is good for it – which is not necessarily a bad thing. It's just that I would prefer an Alfa Romeo or TVR.

But which? Before driving one, I had the TVR pegged as the sports car created for those who regretted the passing of the TR6. But the 3000S is altogether more modern and refined: the shape of things to come rather than a reflection of the past. In many ways it's better than the Alfa Romeo, but for me it's not quite enough to counteract the Spider's sheer beauty and fine detailing, or the feeling you get from driving it. So it's a win for the underdog.

Thanks to *TR Register (tr-register.co.uk); Alfa Romeo Owners' Club UK (aroc-uk.com); TVR Car Club (tvrcc.com); Export 56 (export56.com)*

“The lines make an aggressive statement, it was a huge break with tradition”

So says Oliver Winterbottom of the angular Tasmin coupé, as the designer is reunited with the popular Blackpool sports car

WORDS **MIKE TAYLOR** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Standing in front of the grand Palladian frontage of Elveden Hall near Thetford, the wedge styling of the TVR Tasmin looks sharp and purposeful, strongly reflecting the automotive trends of the 1970s and a far cry from its predecessors of the '50s and '60s.

Enzo Ferrari is reported to have said caustically that Britain was a nation of *garagisti* and *assemblatori*, referring to the groups of enthusiasts in the 1950s working in small workshops to produce sports cars from proprietary parts fitted to homemade body/chassis units. One such outfit was Blackpool's TVR Engineering (née Trevcar Motors), which was founded by Trevor Wilkinson in 1946.

Wilkinson's first creation was a two-seater, aluminium-bodied design based on a stripped-down Alvis Firebird chassis. It was soon sold to finance TVR Number One, which featured a bespoke, multi-tubular frame. Sadly, that car was destroyed shortly after its sale. Number Two, finished in 1949, was similar in appearance to many open specials of the day: a low-slung, doorless body with cycle wings, it had independent suspension, drum brakes and an 1172cc Ford sidevalve engine.

Manufacturing proper started in 1954 using RGS Atalanta moulded glassfibre shells and, three years later, Wilkinson introduced an integral body and frame in which the chassis rails and outriggers formed part of the shell. The first car to employ this arrangement – its body was formed from two Microplas Mistral front halves – was supplied to an American customer, signalling the start of a lucrative link with the United States.

In 1958, the Grantura was born, while in 1965 the Lilley family – Martin and his father Arthur – bought the concern, introducing the Vixen and the Tuscan V8. Similar in concept and shape to their predecessors, they were followed by the M-series with its revised chassis and lengthened tub.

By the 1970s, however, there was a need for change. Major manufacturers were updating their models, posing potential parts-supply problems for TVR, while its curvy cars were beginning to look dated. An all-new design was deemed essential, and the man given the job of creating it was Ashford-born Oliver Winterbottom – whose surname, he informs us, is a derivation of an Old English Lancashire word for people who grazed their animals at the bottom of a valley in winter.

"My grandfather worked in textiles, car and locomotive engineering, as well as being a naval architect," he says. "My mother was a talented watercolourist and would have attended Slade School of Art, had it not been for the death of her father, which had left the family very short of money. Even so, engineering and artistic skills are strong traits in my bloodline."

After boarding at Denstone College in Staffordshire, Oliver applied to Jaguar for an apprenticeship. "I joined with the specific intention of being a car designer," he recalls. "My father was a GP who had a passion for motorsport. It opened many doors, and in March 1961 I found myself being interviewed at Brown's Lane. On a tour of the factory, I saw the soon-to-be-launched E-type. Immediately, there was a strong mental connection."

Moving into the Coventry styling studios gave Oliver the chance to develop his passion: "The knave plate and face-level ventilation control for the XJ6 were both my designs, and they went into production without change."

A telephone call from former Jaguar chum Mike Kimberley resulted in a move across to Lotus in 1971. Suddenly, Oliver found himself at the forefront of design at the Hethel works, talking about a new range of larger, more upmarket models – the four-seater Elite and Éclat. An introduction that was orchestrated by the designer between Colin Chapman and legendary stylist Giorgetto Giugiaro resulted in the mid-engined Esprit, and Oliver suggested that the Italian might consider the Maserati Boomerang as inspiration.

Then followed a period at Chapman's Moonraker boatyard in Brundall on the River Yare, before leaving to establish a freelance consultancy in Norwich. His introduction to Martin Lilley and TVR came via a mutual friend, Mick Rawlings, who was aware of the need for a fundamental change in direction of design and engineering for the Blackpool firm's next generation of cars.

As we stand admiring the blue 'long-tail' Tasmin S2 coupé, Oliver reveals candidly: "In embracing the wedge theme, first at Lotus with the Elite and Éclat in the early 1970s, and later with the TVR, I have to give a degree of credit to Colin Chapman and the Type 72. That was a wedge-shaped racing car and arguably years ahead of its time. To my mind it was truly iconic and had a great influence on my thinking at the time."

We quiz him about the notions and ideas that were going through his mind at the outset of putting pencil to paper to create the new TVR. "It was a huge break with the firm's tradition, and any thoughts about its shape and appearance have to be viewed in the context of the 1970s," he asserts. "It spoke strongly about Martin Lilley's feelings of confidence in the company. This car had to perpetuate those beliefs into the 1980s and beyond. Although TVRs were seen by some as being a little beneath Lotus at the time, there was really no need for that degree of condescension."

As we inspect the straight-edged bumper and front chin-spoiler treatment, which so characterise the Tasmin's frontal appearance, Oliver explains the background to how they came about. "These lines do make for an aggressive statement," he attests. "I wanted to position the front as low as possible and yet remain within the US regulations. It's for this reason that there is the break in the swage line as it flows over the front axle.

"As for the shape of the airdam, that was the culmination of testing and development. We only had one night in the wind tunnel at MIRA, and the box-like aperture, which gives a good flow of air into the radiator, ensured that frontal lift was strictly controlled while creating a reasonable drag coefficient. Significantly, the aerodynamic benefit from it is good for about 0.5 secs off the 0-60mph acceleration time. The shape also did away with the need to add a conventional grille. We just used a wire mesh, which acted as a convenient stoneguard to prevent missiles from entering the fragile radiator core."

The pop-up headlights are another strong styling statement. "They were a solution to accommodate the low height of the front end of the car," Oliver explains. It is important to remember that headlights then were regulated in size: you could either have twin 5¾in lenses or a single unit of 7in diameter.

The designer remains justifiably proud of his sharp-edged TVR creation, which marked the start of a new era for the company

V6 was initially problematic, as Oliver recalls

Angular theme continues in the cockpit, which is neatly trimmed in wood and vinyl

The single headlight both provides better illumination and is cheaper to install."

Oliver points to the TVR decal on the nose: "John Bailey did this wonderful graphic artwork for the logo, which I think is superb. It is another example of design from the days of the drawing board, before the introduction of CAD, which came much later."

Moving on to the overall styling of the body, Oliver remarks: "There had to be a consistency of theme throughout the car's shape. Moreover, with a wedge silhouette there is an element of aircraft influence; the sharp, pointed front, which allows for the rear to be larger and wider. Equally important is that, crosswise, the roofline has a softened curvature to allow for the tops of the doors to be as high as possible.

"The bonnet changed quite a lot throughout the life of the Tasmin. There were several critical issues, including improving torsional rigidity by letting in recesses and angles. We also added some grilles to allow hot air to escape from the engine bay, while another consideration was the raised centre section to clear the power unit beneath."

When it came to the Tasmin's external trim, Oliver decided to avoid the complication involved in shaping extrusions for the fixed window surrounds by deleting them from his design – the Tasmin reputedly being among the first production vehicles to have direct-glazed windows without finishers. "The black edges were added by Triplex during the manufacture and hide the adhesive used to fix the glass to the bodyshell," he explains. "Significantly, the heated rear window element also served as a radio antenna, which I believe was an industry first."

As we continue round to the back of the vehicle, the stylist recalls: "Obviously, with the car being a wedge, I wanted to keep the tail as high as possible. I raised the height of the transom panel, which carries the numberplate and rear light clusters, and added a glass insert to improve rearward vision when parking. It also enabled us to use a single piece of glass supported on two simple hinges for the opening tailgate. It was cheap and easy to fit during manufacture."

The chassis engineer on the project was Iain Jones, as Oliver remembers: "Iain and I had worked together at Lotus, and for the Tasmin we quickly came to an agreement over the wheelbase and track dimensions. We were also united over the suspension design. For the front, it used Ford Granada and Cortina wishbones, hubs and brakes. At the rear, though, we moved away from TVR tradition, which comprised parallel wishbones, instead using trailing arms with Jaguar inboard disc brakes and a Salisbury differential."

Significantly, this new layout affected issues such as suspension travel, which in turn made certain demands on the wheelarch shapes. Furthermore, the new car's wheelbase was to be longer than that of any previous TVR, which is partly why the rear overhang appears to be truncated. "In fact, it's because the rear wheels are further back in the bodyshell," the designer points out.

Clearly, ride and handling would be of paramount importance in the new model, and shock-absorber manufacturer Armstrong spent a considerable amount of time working with TVR on the spring and damper rates. "We'd race over a railway level crossing near Armstrong's Yorkshire factory at unimaginable speeds to assess the settings, much to the chagrin of the gatekeeper," laughs Oliver.

TVR also worked closely with Ford so it could offer its customers warranty cover for the engines and gearboxes. Rather than the 3-litre Essex V6, which produced around 140bhp, the Tasmin received the latest, fuel-injected 2.8-litre Cologne unit mated to a four-speed transmission, as used in the Granada. "When driving the Tasmin prototype, we immediately became suspicious because it didn't perform as well as we had expected," recalls Oliver sagely. "We knew that it would be down on torque – the manufacturer's figures already revealed that – but its acceleration and maximum speed were rather disappointing."

Above, left-right: short-tail Tasmin, as launched in 1980; four-seater Éclat was little changed from Oliver's original sketch; his Lotus Esprit proposal didn't make production

In mid-1980, TVR was busy arranging for type approval in Germany, and the authorities requested a power-curve printout for the Tasmin installation. Oliver says: "We contacted Ford Power Products near Coventry for help, and sent our engine fitted with a bespoke exhaust. After two weeks of testing they called to say they couldn't get the output to match the standard set-up. My suggestion was that they fit an exhaust from a Granada. They tried again, and the power delivery was still lower than expected. I called Bob Lutz, chairman of Ford Europe, who suggested we send the engine to Weslake Engineering in Rye, Sussex. Within a day, possibly even before the engine had reached Weslake, they faxed over a power graph, which appeared to show the 160bhp output as publicised for the Granada 2.8i."

Looking at the engine bay today, Oliver suggests that TVR made a reasonable job of the layout, bearing in mind when the Tasmin was conceived: "The arrangement of wires and pipes is quite tidy, the important point being to put across a message of neatness. While customers looking at a vehicle in the showroom might not be consciously aware of the underbonnet experience, it all forms part of the overall impression, making the product sufficiently attractive to buy. Later, of course, vehicle engine-bay design went on to become a science in itself."

In the event, the Tasmin prototype covered about 60-70,000 hard miles of evaluation, with Oliver regularly blasting up the M6 on his way to work, checking the oil and water temperatures at high speed. It's his belief, however, that the power-output issue was never satisfactorily resolved and that the Tasmin's performance when fitted with the Ford V6 did, in part, lead to the later adoption of the Rover V8 – a development that resulted in a significant change to the character of the TVR. "It is interesting to reflect," says the designer, "that in total there were as many of the V6-engined Tasmins as there were V8s."

Inside the luxurious leather-trimmed cockpit, Oliver explains how his design for the cabin came about: "I can recall sitting in the wooden buck with a large piece of paper, marking out where the instruments would be obscured by the steering wheel. And, although this is a Series 2 with a different type of wheel, I can see 99% of the dials clearly." To prevent reflections in the instrument glass caused by the acute rake of the windscreen, the fascia was given a pronounced recess for the dials.

"The dashboard was always going to be finished in a wood veneer," he continues. "This wasn't unusual in the 1970s and '80s, and tended to elevate the product in terms of quality. Some earlier TVRs that predated the Tasmin also had veneered dashboards, so we were also perpetuating a theme. The alternative would have been to finish it in something like matt black, which would have killed the elegance stone dead."

The design for the centre console, with its heater and radio controls, was a simple matter of functionality, says Oliver: "I wanted the driver to reach the knobs without the need to stretch forward. Remember, this was a time when car radios were still quite large, and in the Tasmin it had to be placed in front of the heater, bringing it quite far into the cabin."

Clockwise: Oliver explains the benefits of the unusual two-piece rear glazing; fascia was designed so the steering wheel wouldn't obscure dials; pop-up lights

'The prototype did 60-70,000 hard miles of evaluation, often blasting up the M6'

Another characteristic is the pronounced width of the transmission tunnel. "This was dictated by the location of the chassis rails, which run forward to the suspension pick-up points and rearwards to the differential mountings," he explains. "However, the bonus is that it makes for a very comfortable seating position, with your outward elbow resting on the armrests and inward elbow on the tunnel."

Apart from being in harmony with the angular shape of the body, an advantage of the Cubist interior styling is that it makes the task of the trimmer that much easier. "The hide isn't under tension," points out Oliver. "In contrast, when leather or vinyl is stretched into corners, after a period of time it begins to wear and then pull away, making the interior look shabby."

Like so many specialist car companies, economies of scale dictated that TVR use components from larger manufacturers. "One example is the wiper stalk, which for the Tasmin came from the Triumph TR7," he says, pointing to the delicately annotated control. "Whenever people mention it, my reply is always, 'What do you expect?' To tool up for an item such as this in-house would not be commercially viable. And would it be any more reliable when its job is simply to turn the wipers on and off?"

Moving to the rear and opening the tailgate reveals a spacious, flat deck area for luggage: "There was no facility on this model for a rear seat – that came on the +2 variant. This version is fitted with twin fuel tanks, which are located beneath the floor ahead of the rear suspension turrets, helping to lower the centre of gravity."

Oliver returned to Lotus in August 1980, and the Tasmin coupé was launched at the Frankfurt motor show the following month. The convertible and 2+2 were displayed at the London Motor Show soon after, while an automatic version and a more frugal 2-litre Ford Pinto-engined option came the following year. Increasingly powerful versions of the wedge continued to be manufactured by TVR for more than a decade, the last being the 400SE. Production ceased in 1991.

Standing back to admire the Tasmin's angular elegance, Oliver concludes: "If I had the luxury of designing this TVR today, I would certainly be happy to use the wedge effect again, but I think that I would make sure that overall it was softer."

Thanks to *Andy Hutchinson and Lord Iveagh at Elveden Hall (elveden.com). This story was first published in C&SC in 2017; Oliver Winterbottom sadly passed away in November 2020, aged 76*

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DHA 575Y

Pound stretchers

Overlooked, undervalued and eye-catching to say the least, four British soft-top options are assessed

WORDS **CHRIS REES** PHOTOGRAPHY **TIM WREN**

School's out for summer. Long sunset evenings and heat-soaked lunchtimes are Siren calls to crack a convertible sports car out of the garage. But if your motoring cupboard is bare and your bank balance is on the ragged side of threadbare, do you simply grit your tin-top teeth and bear it? Not at all. Here are four routes into ragtop driving that won't upset the bank manager.

We've bypassed the usual entry routes into drop-top sports-car ownership, the MG Midget and Triumph Spitfire, and headed straight for the less obvious choices, choosing two rival pairs. For sheer value for money, it's hard to beat our first coupling, the Triumph TR7 and Reliant Scimitar SS1. Both have been much maligned in the past, which partially explains the extraordinary value they offer. No doubt about it, the SS1 is the greatest sports-car bargain here, with perfectly roadworthy examples still going for rock-bottom prices. An MoT'd drophead TR7 shouldn't set you back much more, while a little further up the price scale, but no lesser bargains for that, are the Jensen-Healey and TVR Tasmin 2.8i. In anyone's book, all three are top value.

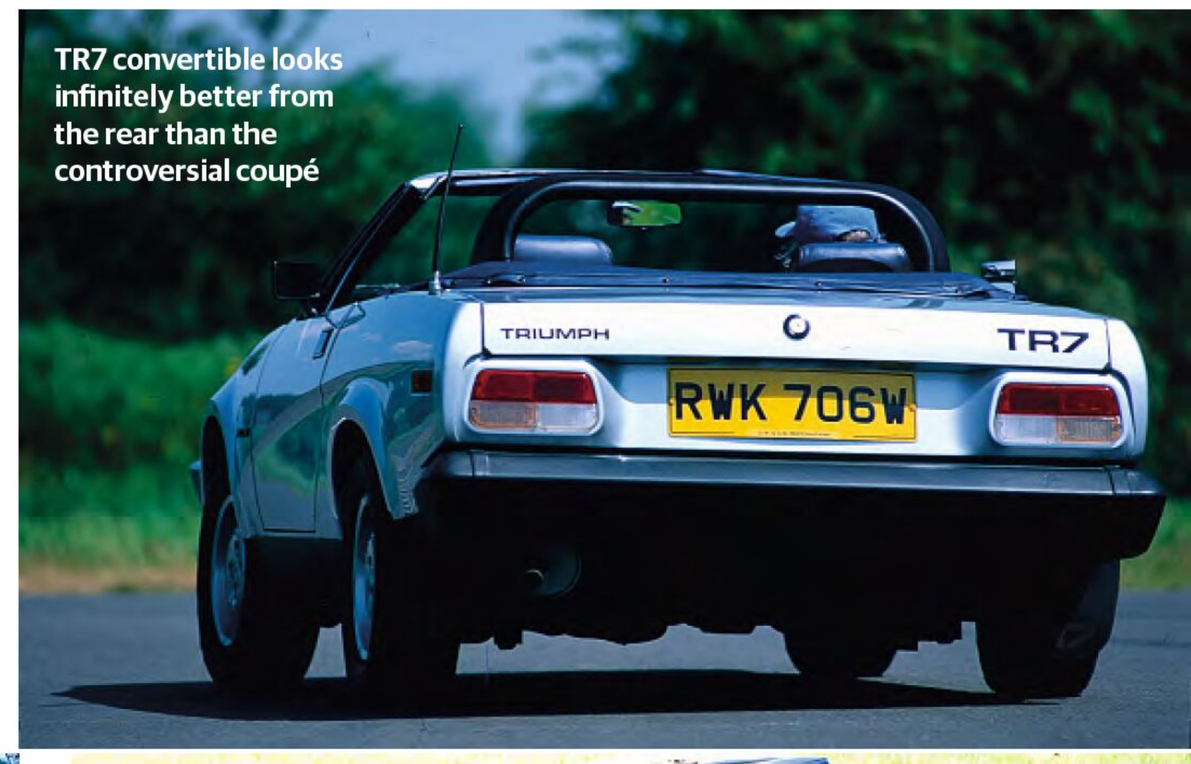
So what we have here are three wedges, and a Jensen. Only the Jensen was a real design-by-committee job – almost everyone with any design experience at Jensen had a hand in it. In the company of the wedges it looks far removed from the oft-quoted blandness that dogs it in classic circles. It obviously comes from a different age – there isn't a straight line on it, and it eschews pop-up headlamps in favour of indented round eyes – and it looks the happiest of all the cars here as a result.

The Scimitar SS1's design provenance is also a little murky. It was Giovanni Michelotti's last design before he died, although many have suggested that the car was unfinished and was delivered to Reliant 'not properly cooked' when the old man span his spaghetti for the last time. Its separate, tubular frame meant that designing new body panels was fairly easy, and William Towns (one of the people with input into the Jensen-Healey) had several goes at restyling the SS1. The Michelotti shape has some very odd details, such as the jut-forward accents over the front wheels, mirroring those at the rear, and a sort of 'folded cornflakes packet' effect at the rear end. The bodywork – made of three different types of plastic – also has perhaps the dodgiest panel fit in history.

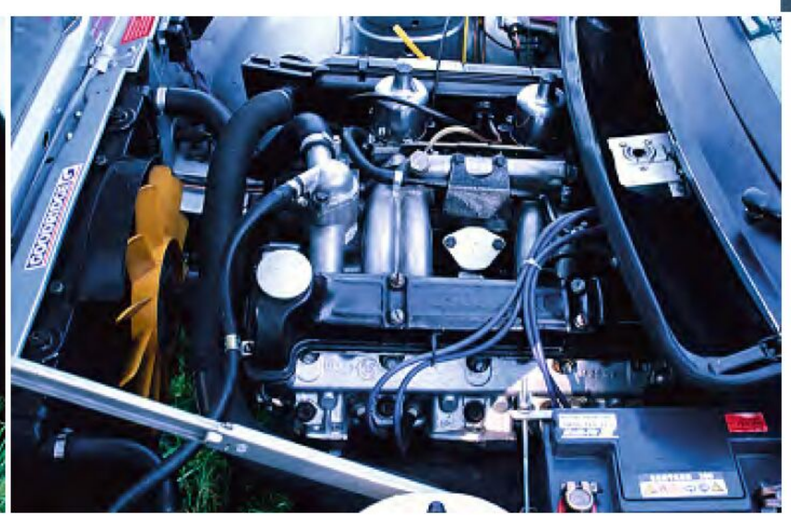
The TR7 remains the archetypical wedge, a Harris Mann fantasy of sculptured cheese. Triumph's launch ads compared the styling to Lamborghini and Ferrari, but only showed the front end, the car's happiest elevation. From other angles the plot goes awry, but the drop-top is still a far nicer design than the coupé.

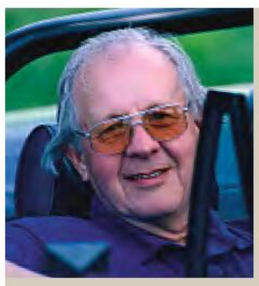
And what of the Tasmin? The final fruit of Martin Lilley's tenure at TVR before Peter Wheeler's acquisition

'If your bank balance is threadbare, here are four easy routes into summer ragtop driving that won't upset your bank manager'



TR7 convertible looks infinitely better from the rear than the controversial coupé





1981 TRIUMPH TR7 CONVERTIBLE DON McCOY

Don McCoy is a British sports-car nut – as well as the TR7 convertible he has a fixed-head TR7, a Stag and a Mk3 Healey Sprite. But it's obvious the TR7 is the apple of his eye: "I'd always wanted one because it's such a comfortable car." In the five years he has owned this 1981 example, it has had new wings and sills, and has been resprayed Iceberg Silver from the original Pharaoh Gold. Other modifications include an unleaded head, stiffer springs, Spax dampers, Mintex brake pads, an Aley roll-over bar and blue leather upholstery.

Clockwise: extreme wedge shape; plastic wheeltrims; Dolomite-based four-pot; mass-produced interior

1976 JENSEN-HEALEY

DAVID BOOTH

David Booth is a dyed-in-the-wool Jensen-Healey enthusiast. He's owned one since 1974, when he traded up from an MGB, and has never looked back. Now he's the Healey Registrar in the Jensen Owners' Club, and has a GT and an Interceptor, too. Amazingly, this rare Mk2 five-speed model was found derelict in a scrapyard in the Wirral in 1988, and was restored by David using mostly new parts. It features a larger, 2.2-litre Lotus twin-cam engine, but is otherwise as original as they come, and a multiple concours-winner.

Jensen-Healey has notable body roll and can be difficult to adjust; impact bumpers dominate the styling

Clockwise: supple ride; interior from another era; stylish wheels; sweet Lotus twin-cam

of the company, it is another graduate of the wedge school. Distinctive though it is, it could never really be described as beautiful. The smooth, uncompromising rise of the nose is tempered by a really awkward knuckle in the front wing above the wheel, which looks as if someone has bent the shape around some angle-iron. Again, the convertible version works better than its coupé sibling, and its brash character surely scores the highest 'cool' quotient of all the cars gathered here.

The contrasts spill into the cabins, too. The TR7 appears the most mass-produced, which is both good and bad news. In its favour, it looks integrated and well laid-out, and in 'our' car the seats have been retrimmed in blue leather. Against it, the grey plastic looks soulless and downmarket. But not as downmarket as the Reliant's cabin, whose flimsy trim, plastic door panels, dated red-and-grey upholstery and Metro-sourced instrument binnacle remind you of questionable kit cars.

The Jensen-Healey and TVR represent a superior flip of the specialist coin, the Jensen's attractions including a downward-angled instrument binnacle and the light wood trim that distinguishes the Mk2. Even so, it lacks the sense of occasion of the Tasmin, with its trademark super-wide transmission tunnel dominating what is easily the broadest cockpit of the four. Tasteful magnolia half-leather upholstery, lustrous walnut inserts, a Momo steering wheel and a clear-to-read six-gauge dash give it a luxurious, feel-good aura.

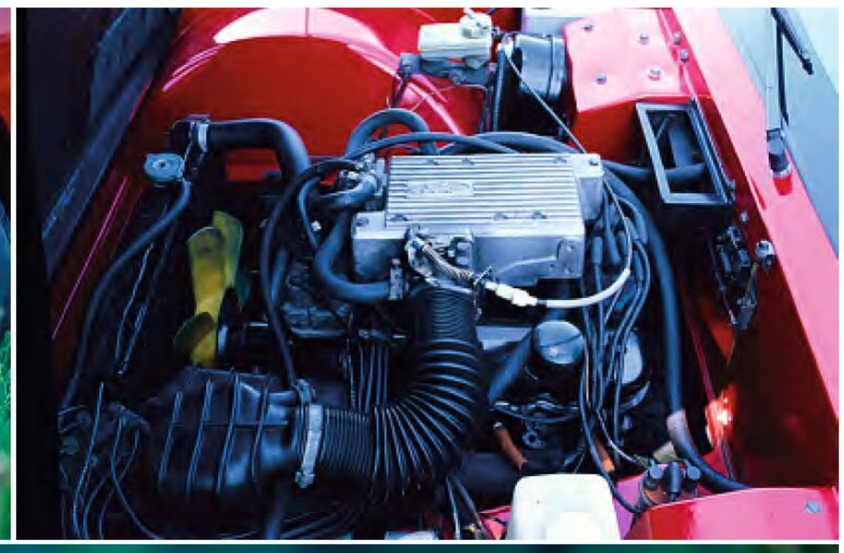
You can't drive a soft-top without considering raising and lowering the roof. A bad hood can make life a battleground of skinned fingers and cussing, a well-designed one presents as little fuss as possible. Instantly falling into the latter category is the TVR's elegantly simple top. It has a hard centre roof section that just unclips and stores in the boot, while the folding rear section pushes back into the area behind the seats. The operation takes less than a minute and is easy for one person. And as for the TVR

1983 TVR TASMIN 2.8i

ALAN MORRIS

Having retired from his job as a bank manager, Alan Morris treated himself to a TVR Tasmin as a "big boy's toy". He came across the car on a dealer's forecourt and was immediately struck by its superb condition and reasonable price. It's almost entirely original – even the decals are still settling in – and, while not in concours condition, it's not far off. It has proven very reliable so far and parts pose no problem at all, because the mechanicals and much of the trim are Ford, and the factory body moulds still survive.

Clockwise: Tasmin is the fastest here; Cologne V6 gives 160bhp; BBS cross-spokes; huge transmission tunnel



bugbear of leaks, the Tasmin's roof is better than later types, its only weak area being the seal at the top of the windscreen pillar.

The other hoods all require some element of fiddling around and stowing under tonneau covers. The TR7's is easy to fold down (not so easy to re-engage, though), but suffers from having a fiddly pop-stud tonneau. The same is true of the Jensen, only more so. Folding back the roof is not the problem, but getting the vinyl cover over it takes for ever. The Scimitar's top can be stowed away in about three minutes, and it, too, suffers the tonneau torture.

All are two-seaters and the best for luggage space is the Jensen-Healey with its long, deep tail and generous shelf behind the seats. The TR7 is next; the SS1 struggles to accommodate two squashy bags; and once you have the Tasmin's roof and spare wheel in place in its boot, you can forget carrying anything.

While you may sit low down in the TVR, it's lofty compared to the Reliant, which you feel as if you sit on rather than in. Firing up the longitudinally mounted 1.6-litre Ford CVH engine (basically an Escort XR3 unit) produces an instantly recognisable and rather lumpy sound. The CVH was never a great performance engine, but it has a twin-choke carburettor and the SS1's exhaust note is pure sports car. With only 96bhp, performance is not the Scimitar's strong suit (the Nissan Silvia Turbo-engined 1800Ti version with 135bhp is far better in this respect). Progress through the gears is positive, however, and despite the unusual, forward-canted gearlever, the Ford Sierra-sourced five-speed 'box is easy to use.

That the TR7 is quicker is never in doubt. It will run out of puff at around the same top speed as the SS1, but in every acceleration shootout it beats the Reliant with ease, though the Dolomite-derived 2-litre, four-cylinder engine is certainly showing its age. Driving it underlines how wide of the mark Triumph was in creating its 1970s sports car – it feels unrefined, wooden and unresponsive. The

'The 2.8-litre V6 in the Tasmin sounds, looks and feels butch, and flooring the throttle produces an attention-grabbing roar'

steering is slow, weighty and dead-feeling, leaving you discouraged to explore the handling – which is just as well, because it is limited. The stiffer-than-normal springing on this example keeps the body better under control, but there is no getting away from the understeer and disappointing scuttle shake. On the other hand, the Triumph brakes confidently – perhaps the owner's uprated brake pads provide the answer here.

The SS1's handling is a revelation. It benefits from a low centre of gravity, and a mixture of Vauxhall front and Ford rear all-independent suspension that really works. Unusually, the front end has near-horizontal dampers. The steering is quick (with less than three turns from lock to lock) and the best-weighted of all of the cars present today, none of which has standard power assistance. That gives you the confidence to fling the Scimitar into bends, and it responds with crisp turn-in, minimal understeer and a wonderful adjustability. It's very forgiving, too. It's easy to be apprehensive about the low-cred SS1, but its chassis is easily the most fun of all the cars here.

In the 'senior' contest between the Jensen-Healey and the TVR, another clear winner quickly emerges. The Jensen is plainly a product of late-1960s technology, while the Tasmin has all the benefits of a more developed chassis and a gutsier engine. Let's not be too critical of the Healey, though, because the Lotus twin-cam engine has the sportiest timbre. Open it up and the acceleration is still eyebrow-raising – *Motor*'s 0-60mph time of 7.5 secs beats *Autocar*'s Tasmin time of 7.8 secs. Where it falls down is in a lack of low-down torque and a tendency to go out of tune.

In contrast, the 2.8-litre Ford Cologne V6 in the Tasmin sounds, looks and feels butch. The twin exhausts emit that classic TVR rumble, and flooring the throttle produces a delicious, attention-grabbing roar. While it isn't quite as fast or as charismatic as the later V8 TVRs, the Tasmin is quick and torquey. The contrasts multiply the more you drive these two cars. The Healey has ultra-light steering, the TVR rather a firm helm. The dog-leg five-speed gearbox of this late-model Jensen is light to use, the TVR's rather heavier. The Healey settles into a corner with notable body roll, the TVR has almost none. The Jensen is not as easy to adjust through bends, either, or as sure-footed. Overall, the Tasmin simply feels better planted on the road and ultimately more controllable. And in a sports car, control is surely what all the fun is about.

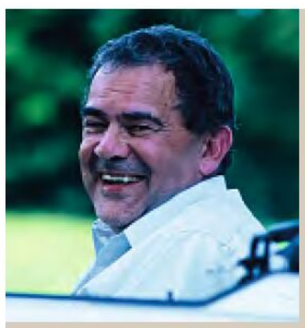
Crunch time: which car would I take home? I can't find much to recommend the TR7 other than its outstanding value – but then this test is all about value. It is merely adequate in too many areas to win in this company. For all its quirkiness, the Reliant SS1 is engaging to drive. You could stomach the compromised styling and low build quality for the entertainment it offers. Better still, find a few quid extra and savour the 1.8-litre turbo version.

The contest between the Jensen-Healey and the TVR is interesting, too. You can buy decent examples of each for similar money, but they come from very different eras. The Jensen is a charming car – understated, and with a fine engine – but the prospect of standing on rust alert and sighing as the Lotus engine meanders off-song again is enough to dissuade many. And it is outclassed by the TVR if only because this benefits from being substantially more modern. The exhaust note, the attractive cabin and the sheer guts of its V6 powerplant swing the day. The Tasmin is the winner... and an A1 undiscovered sports-car bargain.

Thanks to *TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk); TR Register (tr-register.co.uk); Reliant Sabre and Scimitar Owners' Club (scimitarweb.co.uk); Jensen Owners' Club (joc.org.uk)*

SS1's handling is a revelation, aided by its low centre of gravity

Clockwise: quirky styling is an acquired taste; interior feels downmarket; simply styled alloys; 1.6-litre Ford CVH engine



1985 RELIANT SCIMITAR SS1 1600 PETER WILBY

Peter Wilby is a Reliant Scimitar SE5A owner of eight years' standing and was looking for an open two-seater to join it. "I chanced upon an advert in the Reliant Sabre and Scimitar Owners' Club magazine for the SS1 and bought it, almost as an impulse buy." It's used as an everyday car (often with a B-flat tuba in the passenger seat!) and regularly travels the Continent. As for spare parts, Peter comments that it helps to know where everything in Reliant's parts-bin special came from.

OLIVER'S

How can two cars styled by Oliver Winterbottom, the wedgetastic TVR Tasmin and Lotus Éclat, drive so differently?

WORDS **SAM DAWSON** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

TWIST

It wasn't easy being a member of Deep Purple in the early days. One minute you are having a hit single covering Joe South's *Hush* in 1968 and experimenting with psychedelia like Vanilla Fudge, the next you're performing *Concerto for Group and Orchestra* at the Albert Hall. Then, by 1972, you're all off to Montreux, penning the hard-rock anthem *Smoke on the Water*.

Life at Lotus was almost as eventful. Staff used to simple, light kit cars suddenly had to deal with production-line sophistication foisted upon them by boss Colin Chapman's desire to challenge the sporting mainstream. Confronted with the genius engineer's stubbornness, many left to form vehicular Rainbows and Whitesnakes. Paul Haussauer set up Clan in 1969, Brian Luff created Status and Graham Nearn's Caterham took over the traditional Seven in 1973. The message was clear: Lotus stood for pure progression.

At around the same time, the talented stylist of the dramatic Lotus Elite and Éclat, Oliver Winterbottom, was courted by TVR to design an extraordinarily similar car to replace the ageing 3000M, whose Ford Essex 3-litre engine was being retired. The Tasmin would retain a tubular backbone chassis, but it was to be powered by the Cologne 2.8 V6 instead.

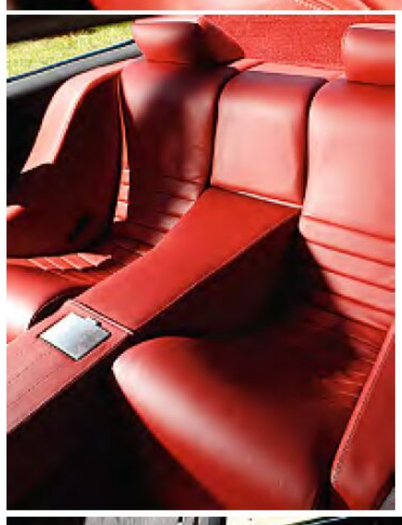
Oliver recalls both firms with affection: "People worked because they wanted to, not for the money. Lotus was a much larger organisation, with more people involved, but still considerably slicker than bigger companies. Ideas were 'faster' than at Jaguar, where I worked before – and the work of the individual more readily identified – but it was very much down to Colin Chapman. He ran it like a racing team. Everything had to be done on time, and you'd suffer if it wasn't. There was similar thinking at TVR, but fewer people in the chain, only a couple of links. Is that even a chain?" TVR's boss, Martin Lilley, was also at a crossroads, as Oliver says: "Should we stretch the old 3000M or move forward? We moved forward. Martin didn't want to 'do a Morgan'."

Although the shapes looked remarkably similar – with angular fastbacks, low noses, hidden headlights and humped Vacuum Assisted Resin Injection moulding-strips snaking over the front wheelarches before arrowing back across the flanks – they weren't pitched at the same buyers. As Oliver candidly puts it: "The Tasmin +2 was meant to broaden the market for TVR. It didn't." The mere 47 +2s built – out of 2600-plus Tasmins – bears this out, as do the useless rear seats, devoid of head- or legroom. Still, plenty of other cars face similar criticism, including Porsches, so it's clearly a driver's interior: sports car as opposed to GT.

Curiously, the first clue to the major difference in these cars' dynamics strikes as they approach. Despite looking so similar, the Lotus is honed for refinement and a low drag coefficient – of 0.32, no less. As a result, it signals its approach with a rushing sound, a cleaving of the wind. The engine noise – a strident combination of snorting carburettors, induction roar and thrashing camshafts – only seems to arrive after the car. The downforce-biased TVR, on the other hand, surrounds itself with sound, a harsh, throaty rumble that can be heard from a mile away. Oddly, the extra cam and more traditional carburetion of the Lotus seem to make up for the brace of additional cylinders in the TVR, resulting in almost identical tones as they accelerate away.

These two cars appear as mirror images of each other in many ways – interior packaging excepted. Or are they? The only way to tell is from behind the wheel. Step forward the Éclat.

The Lotus fits you beautifully, coming as it does from a time before the cutting-edge of car design had to accommodate the super-sized citizens of today. The interior corresponds to the 1970s' 'low-living' aesthetic, an era when the pages of *Decorative Art* were full of Parisi-



From top: spacious cockpit has a classy, more bespoke feel than the Tasmin +2; wacky, sculpted rear bucket seats are roomier than they look – once you've slotted your way in; wonderful Type 901 twin-cam 'four' thrives on revs

styled houses with 'conversation pits' and sofas that encouraged occupants to sprawl their legs across the floor. The Éclat's driver and passengers sink low in their 'pods', with pedals and steering wheel a comfortable stretch away. The pedals are nicely weighted, too, operated by a flex of the toes rather than a hoof of the foot, and the spacing between gearlever and wheel is race-car perfect. Then there are those wedge-shaped doors, kinking down to accommodate the mirrors and assist vision. In contrast, this TVR's non-original mirrors are useless – the factory items work well, however.

The refinement hinted at by the Lotus aerodynamics remains intact as you storm through the gears in the Éclat, with the sound and vibrations of the engine apparently kept at a deliberately intermediate volume that entertains and informs without being intrusive. The twin-cam's snarl is addictive and, once you learn a gentle touch with the clutch, the oft-derided Lotus-Austin-Bean five-speed is a joy, hinting at the precision of its much-praised, Ford-based Elan predecessor.

The handling is as good as you expect from a Lotus: the light, unassisted steering imbues a feeling of affinity with the wheels. Your line through corners is uncorrupted, urging ever-faster approaches to the apex, and the satisfaction it provides makes you wonder whether this was what Grand Prix driving felt like before lateral G-forces turned the drivers into musclemen. Does this JPS-liveried Éclat share DNA with the legendary 72 Formula One car? Perhaps. Oliver hints at F1 thoroughness: "Lotus was all about simplicity, but a lot of thought went into that simplicity."

The Lotus' strongest suit is the way that it entertains while being relaxed, almost to the point of undemanding. If you fancy eating mile after mile of *autoroute* in the quaintly labelled 'overdrive' fifth, the Éclat is as capable as any period Newport Pagnell rival. That steering will always make you feel like a racing driver, but the way the Lotus darts around corners – with roll absent and its ride as well-damped as an E-type's – makes an Aston feel like a lumbering irrelevance. A V8 is faster in a straight line, yet the sheer satisfaction of urging on the Éclat would outweigh the protests of any po-faced statistics obsessive.

The TVR's driving position feels identical at first – the low-seat, high-transmission set-up is forced by the backbone chassis – but the two cars' characters couldn't be more different. The clutch is monstrously heavy, linking as it does to a short-lever Ford four-speeder that requires an action so deliberate that my hand repeatedly slips off the gearknob, bruising my knuckles on the centre console. This is joined by uncertain-feeling brakes and an unnervingly light accelerator.

The distance between gearlever and steering wheel – just a handspan – is the same as the Éclat's, yet the effort required to heave them around is considerable. At low speeds the steering wheel feels as if it's set in concrete,

LOTUS ÉCLAT 523

Sold/number built 1975-'82/1299
Engine all-alloy, dohc 1973cc slant-four, twin Dell'Orto carburettors
Max power 160bhp @ 6200rpm
Max torque 140lb ft @ 4900rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs front, inboard drums rear, with servo
Length 14ft 7½in (4458mm)
Width 5ft 11½in (1816mm)
Height 3ft 11½in (1207mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 1¾in (2484mm)
Weight 2342lb (1062kg)
0-60mph 8.5 secs
Top speed 129mph **Mpg** 20
Price new £8960 (1976)

A JAPANESE TAKE ON THE WEDGE

Despite temptingly low prices for Éclats and Tasmins, buying a shed of each can be a false economy. There is an alternative, however, with Lotus genes, an injected 'six' and Japanese reliability: Toyota's Supra. Oliver says: "I was living in the United States when the Supra came out and remember thinking: 'Bloody hell, that's my car!' It was almost as though Toyota had taken my ideas and bodged them up a bit. When I was working on the M90 project, our prototype went to Japan for a month while they assessed it. We needed Toyota's co-operation – they became shareholders – and I suppose you could say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

It's a heavyweight compared with the Brits, but it's cheaper to run and shares a gearbox, brakes, diff and suspension with the Éclat-replacement Excel. The engine, too, has exotic origins, having evolved from the 2-litre unit of the 2000GT.

making manoeuvring so awkward that you feel inclined to throw a rock-star strop and leave it wherever it stops. Was this chassis really designed by the ex-Lotus engineer Ian Jones? To be fair, though, it does have an all-iron V6 boat anchor over the rack instead of a lightweight alloy slant-four. Mind you, that torquey German Ford motor makes it feel the faster of the two, even if it's only 0.3 secs quicker to 60mph than the Lotus.

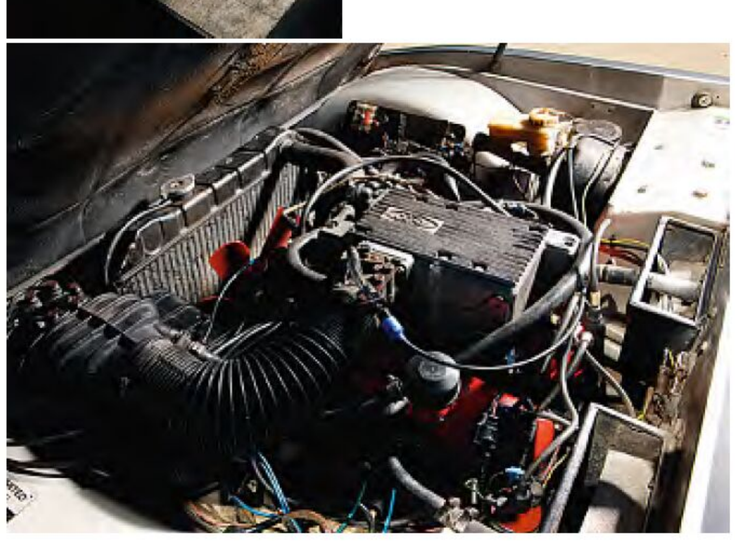
You'll forgive the Tasmin any pig-headed reluctance to conform with reality as soon as you point its flattened snout at the horizon, wrestle the tree-stump gearlever into third and ram your right foot on the accelerator. Its wall-of-amps engine note roaring between the chassis tubes, and the way that the car bucks and writhes, make it harder work: draining, but far more exciting. The effect is closer to that of a Corvette or Cobra than a British sports car with Formula One breeding.

Things get even more hair-raising when you reach a bend. The steering's weight doesn't really lessen much at speed – you just stop noticing it – so the trick is to carry as much pace as possible to avoid the leaden feel returning. Then, just as you're ready to dismiss the TVR as a carefree handful of barely justifiable weekend fun, it astounds you. That tight bend that you just dived into with a look of terror on your face was dispatched just as flat and efficiently as the Éclat managed it.

Perhaps these two aren't so different after all. They demonstrate the same abilities, but deliver them differently – the Lotus in an accomplished, smooth, progressive way that hints at racetrack prowess, the TVR in a scintillating riot of blind faith and madness that will have you cackling like a loon, wondering how you ever got away with it.

Both companies nurtured these traits into their later GT incarnations. Lotus continued with its commitment to lightweight sophistication and subtle, Jim Clark-inspired driving styles, and TVR kept faith with its devil-may-care attitude – shunning anti-lock brakes and airbags while wrapping demonic V8 power in bodywork intended to shock and intimidate.

For such similar cars – sharing so much and being designed along such comparable lines – the differences couldn't be more dramatic, reminding us again of Deep Purple and its siblings. Driving the Lotus is like listening to the wailing, operatic climax of *Child In Time*, while the TVR could be Rainbow belting out *Long Live Rock and Roll*. And yet each has the same driving force behind them, one Ritchie Blackmore. Same with the Éclat and the Tasmin. In the end, though – like the infectious beat of *Black Night* – the deft-handling Lotus is the one that you'll to want to come back to: it just has the edge over an origami TVR.



From top: +2 uses the same doors as the early two-seater, but is 3in longer; angular theme continues inside, with nod to wood dashes of old; tiny rear seats are best used for luggage; Cologne V6 has more torque than Lotus 'four', but is less keen on revs

Thanks to *Stuart Halls for the Tasmin, Mark and Geraldine Parsons for the Éclat, Jane Wedd at Summerhouse Farm (summerhousefarm.co.uk). This story was first published in September 2010; Oliver Winterbottom sadly passed away in November 2020*

TVR TASMIN +2

Sold/number built 1980-'83/47
Engine all-iron, ohv 2792cc V6, Bosch fuel injection
Max power 160bhp @ 5700rpm
Max torque 162lb ft @ 4200rpm
Transmission four/five-speed manual or three-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by wishbones **rear** lower wishbones; coil springs, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 5in (4089mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 3ft 11½in (1207mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10in (2387mm)
Weight 2536lb (1150kg)
0-60mph 8.2 secs
Top speed 134mph **Mpg** 21
Price new £12,800 (1981)

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POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

The long-life Rover V8 that lasted more than four decades, courtesy of MG, Marcos, TVR, Morgan and Triumph

WORDS **SIMON CHARLESWORTH** PHOTOGRAPHY **WILL WILLIAMS/JOHN BRADSHAW**

Clockwise from main: Morgan offers little protection from the elements with its cutaway doors; simple interior and short gearlever; stiff ride ensures it's flat through bends; early V8 under centre-hinged bonnet

Rover was far from the only car maker to see the potential of its 3½-litre V8 engine. Compact, light and powerful, its transformative powers were spotted by others, too. But just as Auntie's starchy respectability was gone for good, shoved aside by the likes of Richard Burton's vicious, P5B-driving *Villain* Vic Dakin, the Rover V8 hiked customers' performance expectations into a different league.

Inspired by the Sydney Allard approach to sports-car design, our quintet here features a selection of sports cars and a GT from both mainstream and specialist manufacturers. By no means an exhaustive line-up, these models represent the first time each marque used an engine that would go on to become one of the 'it' units of the British motor industry in the late 20th century.

Despite the Buick-derived V8 predating the 1968 formation of the vast British Leyland Motor Corporation combine, it would take until the early 1970s before one of its sporting cars was fitted with the unit. No such leaden-footed shilly-shallying would hamper Morgan, and in 1968 the 160bhp Plus 8 was launched. It proved to be everything the misguided Plus 4 Plus coupé wasn't and couldn't accomplish, because it helped to preserve the marque during an era fixated by novelty and futurism. The Plus 8 remained in the Morgan line-up until 2004, when Rover V8 production finally ceased.

This original, low-mileage 1969 Plus 8's only stylistic identifier is its alloy wheels, which complement its '30s dress rather than clashing with the Morgan's coachwork – as if Bertie Wooster were wearing a tie-dye T-shirt.

Much of the experience is similar to its four-pot sibling, however: scatterbrain ergonomics, the deliberate and chunky Moss gearbox that won't be rushed, the rag 'n' bone sliding-pillar ride, a refusal to roll, tasty steering and neutral handling with just a hint of understeer. The difference is that the gearbox's scream seems louder with an engine that only grows more vocal as it heads towards 3000rpm on the 6000rpm tacho. Its muscular poke is delivered with a velvety-smooth, Detroit-sourced soundtrack. In blustery weather, the driver gets a thorough airing thanks to those cutaway doors. As ever, the conclusion has to be that the Morgan isn't merely a car, it's an experience.

After Rover's mid-engined P9 had been cancelled, BLMC finally got around to selling something sporty with the Rover V8 in 1973. MG was adept at experimenting with other manufacturers' engines and had engineered its own V8 conversion, but this had been halted by Leyland – only for the success of Ken Costello's MGB V8 conversion to influence Leyland's change of mind. Available solely as a tin-top –

Clockwise from main: Dunlop rims and V8 badges reveal what lies beneath; cabin allows near-perfect driving position; steering is lighter than the MGB; V8 added 40bhp and 20mph

a decision taken to protect sales of the Triumph Stag – the 125mph GT V8 was powered by the low-compression 137bhp unit. Alas, just 2591 GT V8s were built, and production stopped in late '76 due to sales being hit by the aftershock of the Yom Kippur oil crisis.

Back then, as today, the MG was a subtle sporting GT with only its Dunlop wheels and V8 badging differentiating it from its 95bhp four-pot sister. This 1974 specimen is a beautifully managed blend of gleaming exterior presentation and original, untouched interior.

The lovable MGB always had a good voice, but those four extra cylinders serve only to strengthen the GT V8's image as a 'poor man's Aston Martin'. Its positive steering is lighter than an MGB's, loading up progressively as the body rolls through the tight esses of Curborough Sprint Course. Even in these gusty and damp conditions, the MG puts down its 193lb ft of torque without fuss or furore. The overdrive gearbox is sweet, the clutch light, the brakes effective, the cabin roomy and the driving position faultless. Vision is unhindered and it has a practical hatchback boot. The MGB GT V8 is hard not to like, then, and only reminders of current values scupper notions of pressing one into daily service – and being in a position to buy one.

'The BGT V8 is hard not to like, and only reminders of current values scupper notions of pressing one into daily service'

Keeping things in the dysfunctional family, it's the turn of another short-lived, low-run sporting British Leyland tourer: the Triumph TR8. This model fell victim to an unfortunate combination of the TR7's tarnished image, Leyland's woes, 1979's second oil crisis and unfavourable exchange rates against the dollar. Often regarded, particularly in drophead form, as the car the TR7 should always have been, 'the shape of things to come' remains a wedge of contention. Not only due to its overconfident styling, but also because it felt like a step too far from being an heir to the TR6's sports-car riches – and that's before considering the many production and quality issues.

This highly original, 29,000-mile TR8 was built for the managing director of BL America, and at Curborough the long-legged cruiser is a fish out of water. Designed for the US market, it doesn't like to be hustled because, although the V8 will shovel it in a straight line, the soft suspension generates plenty of roll and pitch. Playing with the fluid five-speed 'box – and this

Clockwise from main: Harris Mann-designed wedge profile; left-hand drive shows this car's American heritage; inside wheel has a habit of lifting; Bosch injection replaced the Zenith-Stromberg carburettors from 1981

particular LT77 is especially good – it's far happier pointing and squirting its fuel-injected 137bhp. Yes, it shares easy-to-use traits with the MG, but it lacks the Abingdon car's character.

There are shivers through the scuttle and the instruments are clearly presented, but the dashboard feels brittle, the driving position is contorted and requires an Italianate bent throttle leg, and the power steering is over-assisted. Its gearing is fine enough, but it is light, vague and has some unfortunate habits through tight corners. It must be something to do with lateral roll transferring weight to the outside wheel and lifting the inside one, lessening further the steering effort and making the driver involuntarily apply more lock. It is a familiar trait, recalling the tribulations of an early Triumph Stag.

Trading places from the Harris Mann-styled wedge to one by Oliver Winterbottom, the 1986 TVR 350i is an evolution of the Tasmin range. Launched in late 1983 as the Tasmin 350i, its name was shortened a year later to just 350i. The car was designed to fulfil new company owner Peter Wheeler's desire for more power, and was built on the Tasmin tubular chassis that had been developed from the M-series. The 350i set TVR on its path of producing loud, proud and much-loved Blackpool rockers, and sales were soon boosted to up and over the 1000-example mark.

'The soft suspension of the TR8 doesn't like to be hustled: it is far happier pointing and squirting its fuel-injected 137bhp'

The 350i is the loudest and the roomiest car here, and it vies for the title of most eye-catching. The perpendicular dashboard structure is very 1970s, but in this original 1986 specimen it is trimmed with *Howards' Way* '80s detailing. Its driving position is faultless – there's even a clutch-foot rest and an excess of shoulder room. The 7000rpm rev counter doesn't wear any warpaint, and when the car fires up it feels as if you are strapped into a 197bhp thunderstorm rather than a car.

The 350i rolls, but in a controlled and predictable way. There are slight shivers through the steering column, yet the TVR manages to be both nimble and tractable through Curborough's tighter sections. Its aftermarket exhaust system ups the aural raunchiness, which gets positively indecent the further it climbs past 3000rpm. The initial rumble turns sharp-edged before being honed into an addictive class-one holler. There are

Clockwise from main: TVR's sound is most distinctive of the group, aided by an aftermarket exhaust; striking leather trim; it copes with the twisty stuff with ease on track; V8 produces just shy of 200bhp in the 350i

fireworks on the overrun as the brakes, with some reluctance, shed your speed. The light gearchange is long of throw and a touch vague, but the TVR takes corners confidently and enjoyably. The weighting and the feel of the positive unassisted steering give the driver yet another reason to grin – in between the long, hair-raising moments of full throttle.

Moving straight from TVR to Marcos takes us from a car with styling that has probably regained acceptance, to one that is far too eccentric to conform to any notions of fashion trends or prettiness. The 1960s were full of unrealised ideas, false dawns and broken promises, but the Marcos was one of the exceptions that slipped into reality.

After tumbling into receivership in 1972, Marcos was resurrected in 1981. The 1983 Mantula coupé was built around the square-section, tubular-steel chassis that had been developed for the 1969 3-Litre. Featuring an improved interior, the car was wrapped in a variation of the unmistakable 1963 Adams brothers 1800 design. At first powered by a 3½-litre unit, later cars – including this 1991 30th-anniversary edition – came with a 3.9-litre injected V8. Independent rear suspension also followed.

The soft-top Mantula Spyder was launched in 1985, and the convertible soon became a popular concept for Marcos; most examples from then on were produced in Spyder rather than coupé form. The Mantula was superceded in 1992 by the factory-built Mantara, while the Mantula had also been available in kit form. A couple of hundred were produced, including all the kits, but it is believed that not all of those have been built.

'The TVR takes corners confidently and enjoyably, the positive unassisted steering giving the driver another reason to grin'

Despite being born in 1991, this Mantula's accessories – that colour-co-ordinated spoiler and those alloy wheels – feel as if they belong to the previous decade. The driving position is so reclined that it engenders a degree of awkwardness, akin to stumbling into somewhere decadent and leathery run by Cynthia Payne. Although there is plenty of length in the footwell, thanks to an electrically adjustable pedalbox, the cabin and the footwell itself are both narrow, and there is no space reserved for your left hoof.

The rather optimistic 200mph speedometer and the 6000rpm rev counter – with 5500rpm

Clockwise from main: Mantula opened the world of Marcos drop-tops; low driving position offers legroom, but not comfort; Marcos beats TVR for feel; less power on tap than the 350i

redline – are both obscured by the dashboard's top rail and the steering column.

The ride is firm, the steering a crafted blend of ease and beefy feel. The front-end responses, just like the helm, come as a genuine surprise. The Mantula's body control is strict and, although that firmess means it does a sideways shuffle through undulations, discretion advises against goading the rear into showing off.

The gearbox is everything you could hope for: the chunky gearknob fills your palm as the lever is pumped through the well-spaced ratios, and the change is short, sharp and wonderfully weighted. The offbeat exhaust note is positively scrumptious: it's smooth and burbly, backed up by a slight gear whine.

The Mantula really does feel impressively at home on the track and, measured purely by dynamic ability, the Marcos takes the win from the TVR. Its shortfall in factory-claimed power output – 173bhp at 4550rpm versus the 350i's 197bhp at 5280rpm – is compensated for by the Marcos' lower weight (1962lb versus 2564lb), which results in a quicker time to 60mph. Stylistically the Mantula is a bit hit and miss, but come to terms with its oddball essence and driving one is a petrol-powered tonic.

After the fifth of five, the time has come to make a decision. On public roads the Morgan depends rather too much upon the pliability of its occupants' spinal columns – but if you want a Morgan, then only a Morgan will do.

In respect of the duelling Leyland GTs, it is easy to be too harsh on the TR8 because it is a US model, which was really intended to lope along miles of shimmering two-lane blacktop with the wind in your perm. If the suspension specification – particularly the spring rates and dampers – were more to UK tastes, then most of its criticisms would be addressed. But here and now, I would have to opt for the MG. To paraphrase its owner: the GT V8 doesn't do any one thing brilliantly, but it does everything well. Comfortable yet compact, attractive yet practical, with build quality that persistently was at the top of BL's internal league tables, and all with a dusting of MG charisma. Why on Earth wouldn't you?

As for which plastic is more fantastic, unless – unlike me – you can comfortably fit the Mantula, then it has to be the TVR: the 350i has reignited my longstanding but previously dormant Blackpool itch. Dynamically, it is right on the sports-car money, and its driver can merrily howl through big mileages without a fear for their comfort.

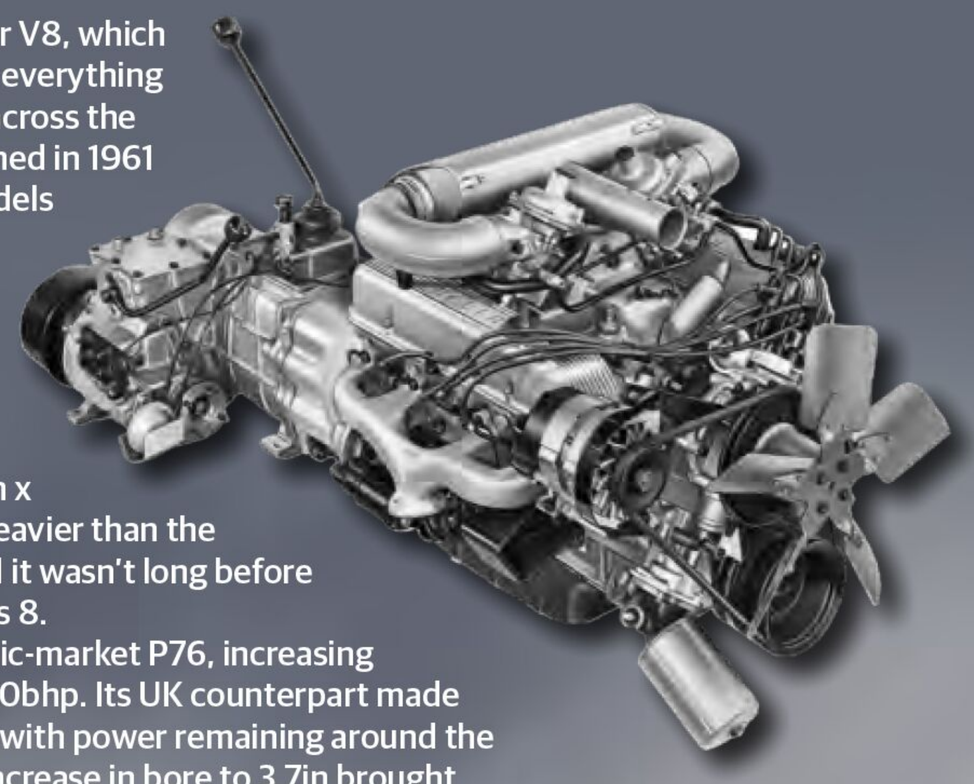
Thanks to *Keith Belcher; Christopher Kenneth Smith; Steve Morgan; Neal Callaghan; Richard Thorne Classic Cars (rtcc.co.uk); TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk); MG Car Club (mgcc.co.uk); Morgan Sports Car Club (morgansportscarclub.com); Club Marcos International (clubmarcos.net); TR Register (tr-register.co.uk)*

ROVER V8: A FEAT OF ENDURANCE

Few engines have matched the longevity and versatility of the Rover V8, which has been in production in the UK since the mid-1960s and powered everything from luxury saloons to off-road racers. But its story actually began across the Atlantic with the introduction of the 'BOP 215', an all-alloy V8 launched in 1961 and which powered a number of Buick, Oldsmobile and Pontiac models until it fell out of favour – and then production – in 1963.

The story would have ended there were it not for Rover's managing director, William Martin-Hurst, who saw promise in the lightweight, compact V8 and eventually convinced General Motors to sell both rights and tooling. The American firm agreed in 1964, and by 1967 Rover had launched its own 158bhp version of the engine – with a capacity of 3528cc and a bore and stroke of 3.5in x 2.8in – that immediately found a home in the P5B saloon. Though heavier than the Buick version at 170kg, it was lighter than most cast-iron 'fours', and it wasn't long before it graced its first sports car this side of the Atlantic – the Morgan Plus 8.

Leyland of Australia experimented with the engine for its domestic-market P76, increasing the bore and stroke to lift capacity to 4414cc, boosting power to 200bhp. Its UK counterpart made subtle improvements to its engine in 1976 for the arrival of the SD1, with power remaining around the 155bhp mark and capacity staying at 3.5 litres until 1990, when an increase in bore to 3.7in brought the venerable V8 to 3.9 litres. This version of the engine graced everything from the MG RV8 to the Range Rover Classic, before subtle tweaks in 1995 raised the power output to 190bhp.



Of all the firms to pick up the Rover V8, TVR ran with it longest, producing several performance variants ranging in capacity from 4.3 to 5 litres to power its flagship Griffith and Chimaera models. In its final stroked form, the 4997cc V8 produced a dizzying 340bhp, comfortably double the power output of the 1967 original. A version of this engine powered the Bowler Wildcat off-roader until 2006.

Above: the all-alloy unit proved lighter than four-pot rivals and endured for four decades. Left: Land Rover Defender-based Bowler Wildcat made 218bhp and 295lb ft in 4.6-litre form

ROLL OF

THUNDER

Drop everything and head to Northern Ireland on a wild TVR chase? It's an offer of an epic classic road trip that's too good to resist

WORDS **ROSS ALKUREISHI** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

A flippant comment from me over a couple of beers is all it took for Paul Jackson of Bristol-based TVR specialist Amore Autos to commit my willingness to memory. Having been regaled with tales of derring-do from his business partner Mark Cosh's trip to Bulgaria to buy a dark-blue TVR Tuscan, when he cut a futuristic glassfibre swathe through eastern and central Europe back to the UK, my reply – "If you ever do anything like that again, give me a shout" – is most definitely now in play.

"Where? When?" I ask. Then: "That soon?" A quick glance at the mounting to-do list on my office wall is followed by: "I'm in." Of course, the most difficult aspect of any road trip is getting it past my partner, who is already of the mind that "messing around with old cars" barely constitutes working. And as for two days on the road in a sports car... Best not to repeat that particular opinion. God loves a trier, though, which is how I find myself the next day at Bristol Airport with a ticket for its Belfast equivalent, and still with absolutely no idea of the identity of our target vehicle – well, aside from one rather big three-lettered clue.

Paul arrives, proffers a handshake and, reading my mind, states: "350i and Chimaera." Excellent – an old-school V8 wedge, plus an even more powerful, curvaceous V8 from the newer wave. "Private sale," he continues. Great, I think. What could possibly go wrong?

From top: Blackpool duo at the dramatic Titanic Belfast building; vendor Hawthorne with Paul Jackson in the shadow of the Harland & Wolffe Samson and Goliath cranes; Cerbera chases wedge – both sit on non-standard alloys

From top: Chimaera interior marked a big step forward in quality – knob between the seats opens the doors; 400 has Rover V8 in 3950cc, 240bhp form; TVR duo feels wide on narrow lanes at the foot of the Wicklow mountains

Plenty, if Mark's Bulgaria trip is an indicator. Apparently the Tuscan performed with aplomb, but an insurance mix-up led to the driver being stopped 30 minutes in and bundled into a police van. "We were given incorrect advice not to register the car on the Motor Insurance Database," says Paul. "It was within minutes of being impounded, but they couldn't work out how to get in. During the delay, Mark called me and I was able to get it on the MID immediately. With a bit of persuasion, he was on his way."

As we descend into Northern Ireland's capital, we're welcomed by a dark, imposing sky. Vendor Ian Hawthorne calls to arrange our pick-up point, but when we arrive there are no cars. Several "We're here" and "Where?" calls later, the penny drops: we're at different airports. It's *Keystone Cops* time, but I booked my flight first – and who knew Belfast had two?

The portents of doom begin to shift upon seeing the TVRs. Fully prepared and ready for the off are two notable milestones of the Peter Wheeler years: a Nightfire Red V8 wedge, in all its short-tailed, pointy-snouted glory, and the second offering of that bold new '90s era, the Chimaera, here in Cherry Red, its glassfibre moulded sensuously rather than aligned with a set-square. After quick inspections of each, both look to be in fine fettle; the 350i's colour wins, but I know which I prefer the looks of and unceremoniously grab the Chimaera keys.

The cabin is all leather, brushed aluminium and thick red carpeting, but fire it up and any illusion that this is a luxury car disappears. The chassis reverberates underneath as a second V8 explosion shatters the morning air from the 350i, before it, too, settles into a deep, low rumble. With a quick wave we're off, destination Rosslare on Ireland's south coast, route to be decided. Although we are a wee bit behind schedule, the only real constraint on our time is making tomorrow morning's ferry for Pembroke.

As we roar onto the A12, the Chimaera is already impressing with the glorious noise from its aftermarket sports exhaust – it sounds mighty good: one part cannon, one part Snap, Crackle and Pop. A worry when picking up an unknown classic can be the vagaries enacted upon it by previous owners – it's amazing how positive or negative an effect these can have, even with a car so simple in formula as the Chimaera. As we hit the city centre, with roofs down, for a whistle-stop sightseeing tour, there's huge pleasure to be had from blipping the accelerator at traffic lights. It's reassuring to see the 'professional' in the lane beside me doing exactly the same, as we communicate via our 16 cylinders.

We take in the awe-inspiring Samson and Goliath cranes, and of course Eric Kuhne's phenomenal, sharp-edged Titanic Belfast building – all from our driving seats. "Did the same lad design your car?" I shout, ignoring my companion's scoff as we downchange and power out of town: time to get some miles under our wheels. At Lisburn we take the A1 south, flashing past Hillsborough Castle.

Already it's clear that the Chimaera is the consummate open GT. The 4-litre V8 is so flexible, pulling from low down in the rev range and with instant power always on tap – overtaking is a pleasurable cinch: you see your space, bang, and you're inhabiting it. The steering is nicely weighted, while the small, short-travel gearlever shifts with a pleasingly mechanical precision and the stiff throttle

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constantly reminds you of the sheer clout available beneath your right foot. Best of all is the cabin, which lifted the quality of the marque's interiors to new heights.

Just south of Newry, we pass effortlessly into the Republic of Ireland – something that would have been impossible during the 350i's production life and even at the start of the Chimaera's. The clouds, which had started breaking some 15 miles north, are now much more sparse, and warm sunshine floods the land. As Paul and I spar with each other, giving rapid bursts of acceleration before tucking in and allowing the other to barrel through, I'm aware of two things: just how good the 350i sounds, and a slight but distinct warming to its origami looks.

In no time we're on the M50 circumventing Dublin, amid heavy traffic that materialised seemingly out of nowhere. However, all's not well with the Chimaera – ah, the dreaded TVR reliability demons, but it feels more like a tyre issue. I gesticulate to Paul and we pull over to confirm a flat tyre. The spacesaver spare is fitted quickly, redundant wheel lumped into the passenger seat – where else? – and after locating the nearest tyre shop, it's soon having a new one fitted while we grab some lunch.

After I've eulogised about the Chimaera driving experience, Paul offers his perspective. "They're our bread-and-butter," he explains. "The model accounts for more than half of the entire TVR production run. Year-on-year they've gone up 10% in value, for the past four or five years, yet you can still get a decent runner very cheaply. Below £10k you're looking at a project: chassis outriggers, interior trim, paint or engine work can each cost around £2k. There's also choice in terms of engine size: most are 4 litres, but the 'big daddy' – a late Mk3 5-litre – is the most desirable. Get a good example of any and the running costs are reasonable – as with the 350i, you can usually budget less than £1000 a year."

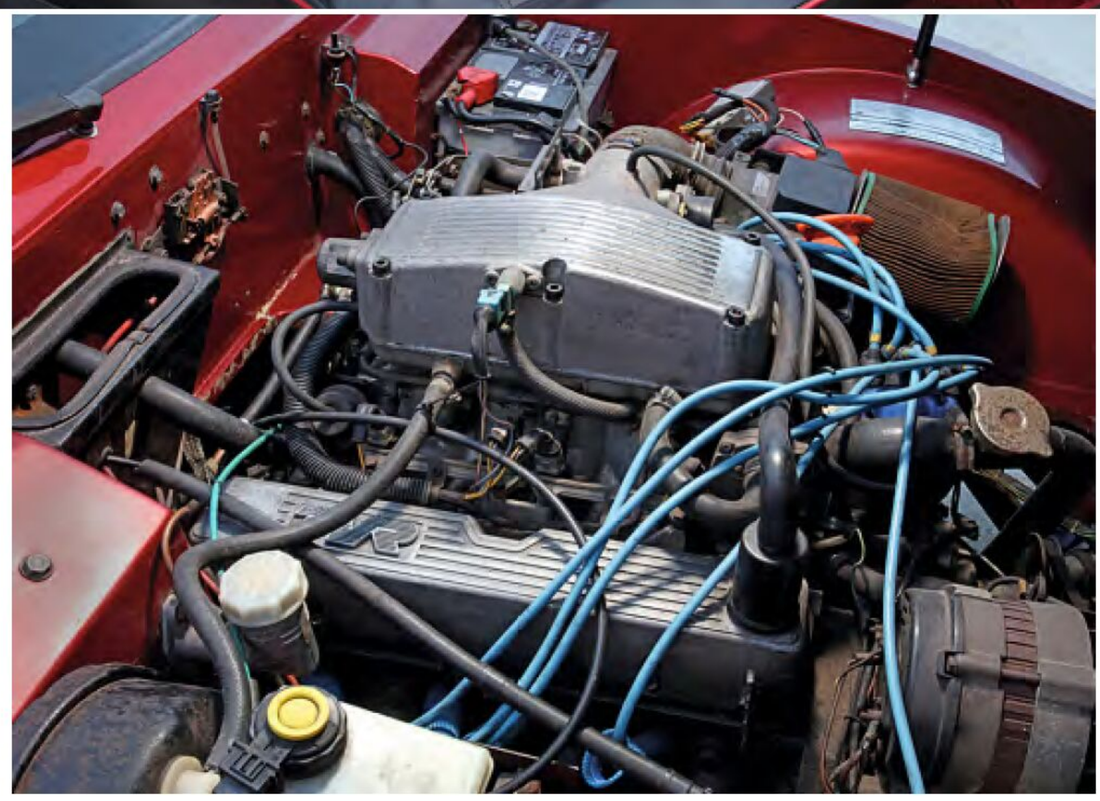
We swap cars and head south off the main thoroughfare on to the R115. As we climb into the Wicklow Mountains National Park, it's time also for a change of environment to find out how good the TVRs are on the tight and twisties. The first thoughts on the wedge are that the cabin is certainly of its era – lost somewhere between the walnut dash and piped-leather seats of the previous generation, and the move upmarket of the next. Throw in some vivid red trim, and a centre console that looks like an afterthought, and it all gets a touch confused.

The chassis feels more crude than that of the later car, and it crashes a little over imperfections in the road, sending a judder through the thick glassfibre body. However, it's a long way from the shake, rattle and roll of earlier TVRs, and the suspension remains compliant on all but the worst surfaces. That's a good thing, because matters are beginning to get decidedly choppy, and as we hit a healthy-sized bump I'm glad I'm in this car and not the lower Chimaera. Many sporty V8s would flounder on roads such as these, but enter a tight corner in the 350i and the steering loads up, feeding a flow of information to your fingertips. Don't get on the throttle too early, but once the wheels are straight, get the power on with a blare from the big-bore exhausts. There's a lot of fun to be had here.

As the mountains echo to the crackling exertions of twin TVRs, my confidence builds. Given the V8's 197bhp and 220lb ft, however, I'm occasionally reminded to take care by a rear-end twitch. It's amazing to think that the company stumbled on its strident V8 formula by default, choosing to replace Ford V6 with Rover V8 to remove the American link for the political minefield of the wealthy Gulf States.

With evening threatening, we join the M11 at Junction 20, and from there it's foot to the floor until we hit Rosslare as dusk approaches. The cars are quickly deposited at the hotel and I'm persuaded to have a pint of Guinness. I wouldn't normally touch it back in the UK, but this is delicious – suggesting that they're keeping the good stuff for themselves. A quick bite to eat and it's off to bed, eardrums throbbing, to sleep the sleep of the contented petrolhead.

Having failed to discuss the 350i's merits the night before – blame the black stuff, the *craic* and fatigue – we do so on the top deck of the ferry. It's a glorious day, and it bodes well for Wales. "The 350i is the car that got me in to TVRs in the first place," explains Paul. "And today it still gives you the best bang for your buck. The pre-cat sound is glorious, but the



Above: wedge at rest on Rosslare beach – bright-red additions lift the angular interior, but the glovebox lid was originally veneered. Right: the Buick-derived, all-aluminium Rover V8 makes 197bhp in 3.5-litre form for the 350i

styling is completely Marmite – loved and hated in equal measure. I think of them as in-between cars – they're undervalued and playing catch-up, both dynamically and in terms of looks. You do get the full TVR experience, though, and if you're easy on the throttle it'll return 30mpg – plus they are fantastic value, although we sold a 420SEAC for big money recently. It's also easier to see the rot on a wedge, because the body doesn't hide the chassis outriggers like the Chimaera."

That has got me thinking, so at Pembroke I keep the keys to the 350i for the journey to Pendine Sands, where we stop for an ice cream and, with the museum closed, visualise the ghost of John Parry-Thomas and 'Babs' tearing along the sand. I get it now, the 350i. It's the founding father of the modern breed, and even the looks are growing on me – and, for a Scot, the low price helps, too...

Clockwise, from right: Paul changes the Chimaera's wheel on the M50 outside Dublin; rumbling on to the ferry at Rosslare harbour; driving into the low sun across the Irish border; parked among the palm trees at Rosslare beach

'There's prodigious grip – just don't put the power down too soon, or you'll be pointing back the way you came'

I'd still have the Chimaera 400, though. Compared to the mechanically near-identical Griffith, it's still affordable. And there's time for one final blast in the glorious Brecon Beacons; we roar up through Carmarthen to Llandovery, then dive headlong into our playground. Paul and Mark regularly guide TVR Car Club driving tours here, so I'm in safe hands. Hot on the 350i's heels, the Chimaera is proving just as adept, but it strikes me that both cars are endowed with a slight 'sledgehammer trying to crack a shelled peanut' approach to cornering.

The steering is sharp and, while it lacks a hot hatch's poise in bends, it's taut and planted at speed, with prodigious grip from its wide rear tyres – just don't put the throttle down too soon, or you'll be pointing back the way you came. That, of course, is the very essence of TVR: a frisson of danger, created by a complete lack of safety aids and a barrel-load of power.

Crossing the Severn Bridge heralds the beginning of the end of our journey, and in 15 minutes we're back at Amore Autos' workshop, to be greeted by Mark. "Pretty epic," says the man who knows a thing or two about marathon drives. Having completed nearly 600 miles in a day and a half, through four countries – and with the roof down – that's exactly how these two windswept and sun-kissed heroes feel.

Our two TVRs have performed without fault, and there's no doubt that either offers a first-class entry into Peter Wheeler's world of big, brutal V8s, with both being perfect fare for either a lengthy road trip or a B-road blast. This duo is a vital reminder of the Blackpool firm's transition from the world of the traditional to that of the modern classic.

Thanks to *Paul Jackson and Mark Cosh at Amore Autos (07824 522371; amoreautos.co.uk)*

TVR 350i

Sold/number built 1983-'90/c950
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv 3528cc V8, Lucas electronic fuel injection
Max power 197bhp @ 5280rpm
Max torque 220lb ft @ 3500rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** semi-trailing links, transverse links; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 2in (4013mm)
Width 5ft 8in (1727mm)
Height 3ft 11½in (1206mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10in (2387mm)
Weight 2213lb (1004kg)
0-60mph 6.5 secs
Top speed 134mph **Mpg** 20
Price new £16,320

TVR CHIMAERA 400

Sold/number built 1992-2003/c6000 (all)
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv 3950cc V8, Lucas 14CUX electronic fuel injection
Max power 240bhp @ 5250rpm
Max torque 270lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 13ft 3in (4015mm)
Width 6ft 1in (1865mm)
Height 4ft (1215mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2282mm)
Weight 2337lb (1060kg)
0-60mph 5.1 secs
Top speed 152mph **Mpg** 24
Price new £27,850

POWER

Can you really hit 150mph on a budget? This quintet from Porsche, Ferrari, Alpine, Lotus and TVR proves it can be done

WORDS **RICHARD HESELTINE** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

CRAZE

Great minds think alike – and so, for that matter, do adolescents. There can be few of us who, as young dreamers, didn't fantasise about one day setting both tyres and trousers alight in a mad, bad and dangerous-to-know supercar, an implausibly named, testosterone-charged rocketship. When you enter the real world, however, those kinds of ambitions stultify. It's hard to put your finger on the defining moment when the dream actually dies, but it needn't be so.

The good news is that supercars – well, old supercars – are merging with the mainstream. For not exactly peanuts, but a remarkably attainable sum, the dream can stay alive. For the price of a boring modern family car, you could be driving the sort of machine that, during the 1980s, would have had you clapped in irons down the county clink for just touching it; a car that gives a blow to the cerebral cortex and wipes out speech patterns every time you nail the accelerator. There are plenty to choose from, too, and here are just five examples of top-notch performance hardware that remains within reach. Two of them sit on the bottom rung of the supercar ladder, two others are in the middle range, and at the top, perhaps unsurprisingly, sits the Ferrari.

But it's a Mondial, the Maranello wallflower that's more 'Ferrari-lite'; a low-calorie option that is, well, a Fiat with delusions of grandeur. Or at least that's what you will have been led to believe, but really it's more a medley of Ferrari's greatest hits, a pukka supercar styled by Pininfarina and powered by the quad-cam V8 from the 328GTB. And it's capable of 155mph.

Then there's the Lotus Turbo Esprit, the last road car to feel founder Colin Chapman's guiding influence. As quintessentially early '80s as Kim Wilde, this bold, Giugiaro-styled wedge might 'make do' with a 2.2-litre four-pot, but it will see off most contenders in a straight line and run rings around cars 10 years its junior through the twisty bits. But it isn't the only 'four' in this group. The Porsche 944 turbo is a genuine 162mph supercar and humbly different from the dainty 924 with which it

TVR 420SEAC

Sold/number built 1986-'88/37
Construction tubular steel backbone chassis with outriggers, composite body
Engine all-alloy, ohv 4228cc V8, Lucas fuel injection
Max power 300bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 290lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** four-point lower wishbones, torque-reaction arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 12ft (3658mm)
Width 5ft 11½in (1816mm)
Height 3ft 7½in (1105mm)
Wheelbase 7ft (2134mm)
Weight 2492lb (1131kg)
0-60mph 4.9 secs
Top speed 165mph **Mpg** 18
Price new £29,500

Clockwise: the SEAC is surprisingly flexible and easy to drive; cabin is better made than earlier efforts; thunderous V8 makes 300bhp. Right: owner Patrick Deary

Clockwise: 944 turbo is quick, but clinically competent; slightly perched driving position in comfortable cabin; turbo 'four' makes 247bhp. Left: owner Paul Howarth

PORSCHE 944 LUX TURBO SE

Sold/number built 1985-'91/c25,250
Construction steel monocoque, polyurethane nose
Engine all-alloy, dohc 2479cc 'four', Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection, KKK K26 turbocharger
Max power 247bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 258.5lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts **rear** semi-trailing arms, torsion bars; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes vented discs, with servo
Length 5ft 10in (1778mm)
Width 5ft 8¼in (1735mm)
Height 4ft 2¼in (1276mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 10½in (2400mm)
Weight 2965lb (1345kg)
0-60mph 5.7 secs
Top speed 162mph **Mpg** 19
Price new £39,893

shares a floorpan and overall outline. While purists rage about how it lacks the gravitas of the seminal 911, its legitimacy within the Porsche family tree can no longer be denied: the 944's roots lie, after all, in the horny-as-hell 924GTP Le Mans racer.

But the spoiler in the group has to be the Alpine-Renault A610, which beguiled as many as 45 punters in the UK during the early 1990s. Virtually unknown outside its homeland, thanks in part to *La Régie*'s remarkably *laissez-faire* attitude to promotion, around 2500 of these dramatic rear-engined, plastic-bodied supercars were made between 1991 and '95.

Yet, compared with TVR's marvellously monikered 420SEAC (for Special Equipment Aramid Composite, obviously...), the Alpine appears positively middle-of-the-road. Based on the 390SE but modded out of all recognition, Blackpool's most ludicrous wedge yet was primarily built to compete in Production Sports Car Racing and was promptly banned after annihilating the opposition on track, taking 19 wins from 24 starts during the 1986 season.

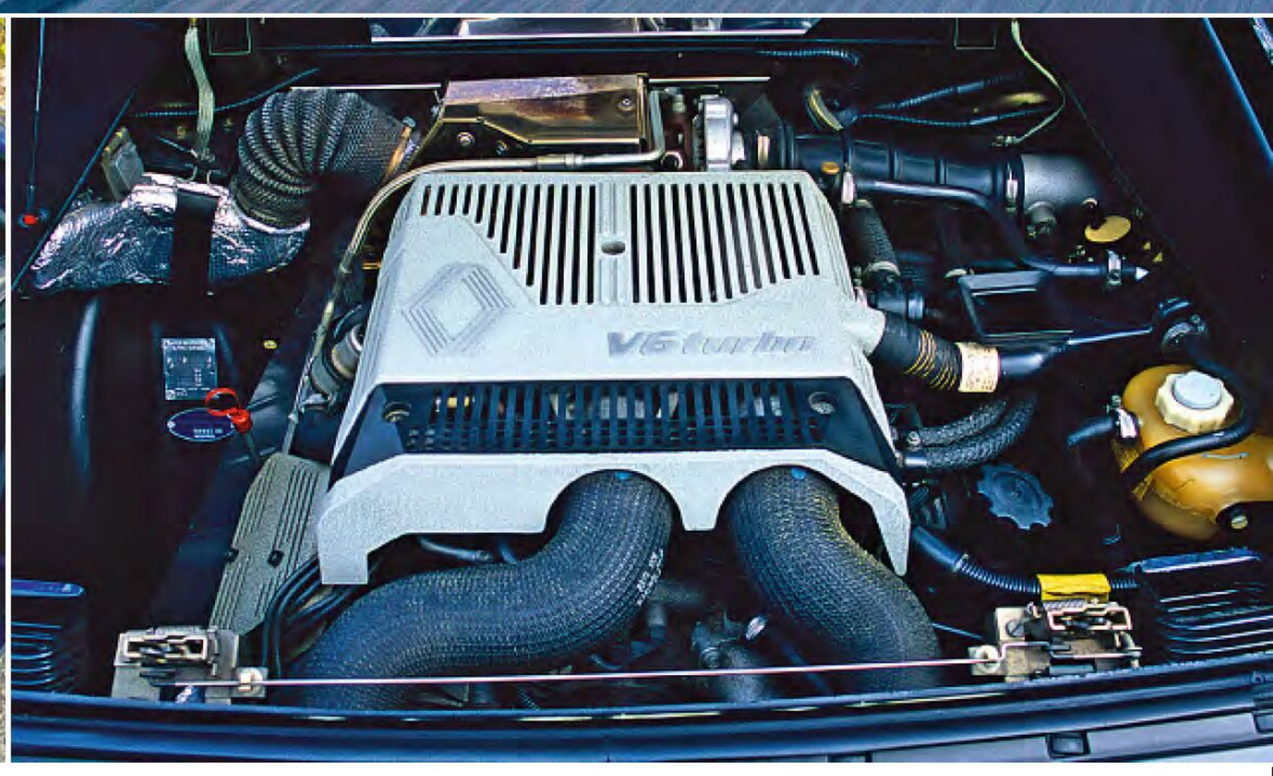
Around 35 of these barking ragtops were made between 1986 and '88, and even now the statistics make for impressive reading. The overbored 4228cc Rover V8 produces 300bhp at 5500rpm and 290lb ft at 4500rpm, and it'll reach 60mph in 5 secs before going on to hit 165mph. But the styling is either frightfully serious or seriously frightful, depending on your aesthetic sensibilities. Purposeful is probably the right word, although there is no getting away from the fact that those 'running boards' and the frankly stupid rear spoiler give the car a slightly comical appearance. Taking pot-shots at a TVR's cabin is like shooting fish in a barrel, but, in this instance, the giddy aroma of Loctite is mercifully absent, and the interior is quite thoughtfully laid out. There is plenty of elbow and legroom, the Stewart Warner instruments on the Cubist-inspired dashboard are easily read and it appears positively civilised.

And then you turn the key. There's an initial ticking, like a countdown to Armageddon, and then the expletives begin: nothing can prepare you for the aural onslaught. Loud isn't the word; the TVR is commotion itself. For what is essentially a tamed racer, the 420SEAC is

ALPINE-RENAULT A610

Sold/number built 1990-'95/818
Construction steel backbone chassis with roll hoop, composite body
Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 2975cc V6, electronic multi-point fuel injection, Garrett T3 turbocharger
Max power 250bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 258lb ft @ 2900rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, servo and ABS
Length 6ft 1½in (1867mm)
Width 5ft 9¼in (1760mm)
Height 3ft 10½in (1181mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 8in (2339mm)
Weight 3130lb (1420kg)
0-60mph 5.6 secs
Top speed 161mph **Mpg** 25
Price new £36,930

Clockwise: A610 is benign, responsive and engaging; 3-litre V6 hangs out the back; plush cabin is a step up from the GTA, with better driving position. Right: owner Tim Jeffrey

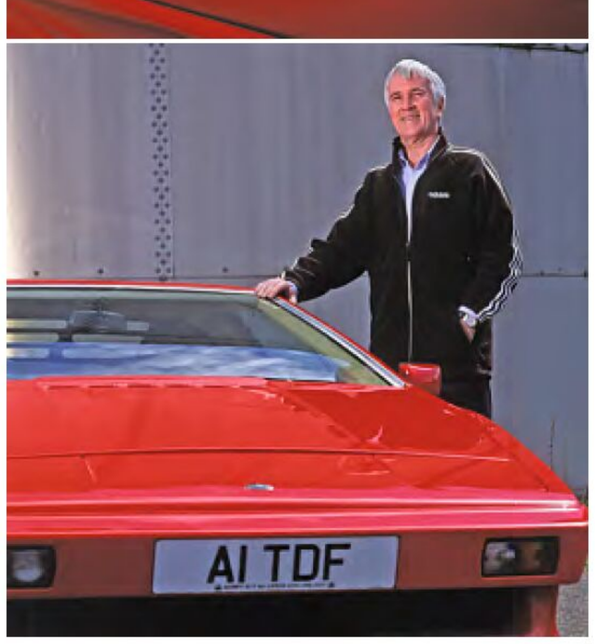


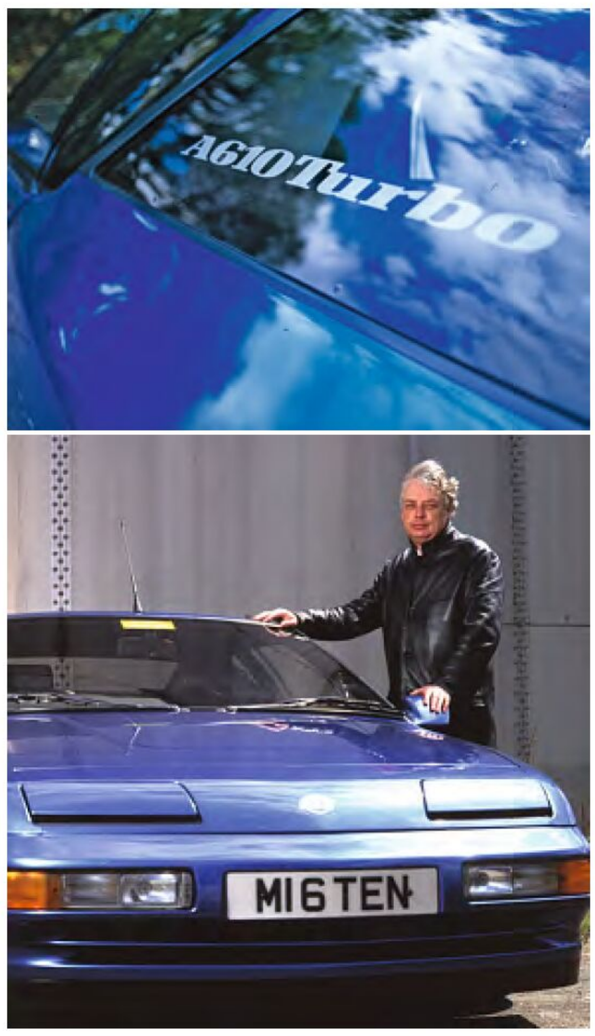
remarkably easy to drive. None of the Rover engine's enduring flexibility has been lost. The colossal torque makes its presence felt from as little as 1500rpm, making power delivery virtually seamless. Acceleration is visceral but without the expected histrionics: there are no flat-spots or peaking, just a relentless surge forwards. Changes in the Rover transmission are a touch notchy, requiring a firm tug, and clean downshifts are near impossible without double-declutching. The ride is unexpectedly compliant, but you're always aware of the short wheelbase. You can feel the back end start shimmying as you attack corners, but the grip is astounding, while the disc brakes (outboard up front, inboard rears) offer colossal stopping power. While it might look belligerent, the 420 is actually a pussy cat. Only the steering lets the car down, feeling strangely detached at speed with an over-rapid self-centring action.

Poles apart in approach to the TVR, the Lotus isn't a perfectly groomed visual triumph. The original Esprit always was pretty, but its Turbo sibling is plain brutal: an affront to curvature. Inside, the handbrake mounted to the driver's right impedes speedy exits, while the tall transmission tunnel (to make room for the backbone chassis) eats into cabin space. The cheap proprietary switchgear, much like the TVR's, lets it down, but it's hard not to fall for the Esprit for its sheer sense of occasion.

It's how you imagine a supercar should be: impractical and claustrophobic. On the move, the ride is unexpectedly fluid, but it's the kart-like steering that impresses most. It tightens the second the suspension is loaded and is beyond direct: its like a racer, and here the car's breeding shines though. Grip is unshakeable, chassis poise only matched by the lag-free throttle response. There's a surprising amount of low-down urge, but it's past 4000rpm where the car comes into its own. Performance is electrifying as you desperately try to change up a cog on the delightful five-speeder in time, with a raucous cacophony only inches behind. It does feel, after a fast drive, that you've had a thorough workout, but you can't fail to enjoy the Esprit. Every sortie becomes an adventure.

A sense less evident in the Porsche: initially, it seems so self-aware as to almost be doing the



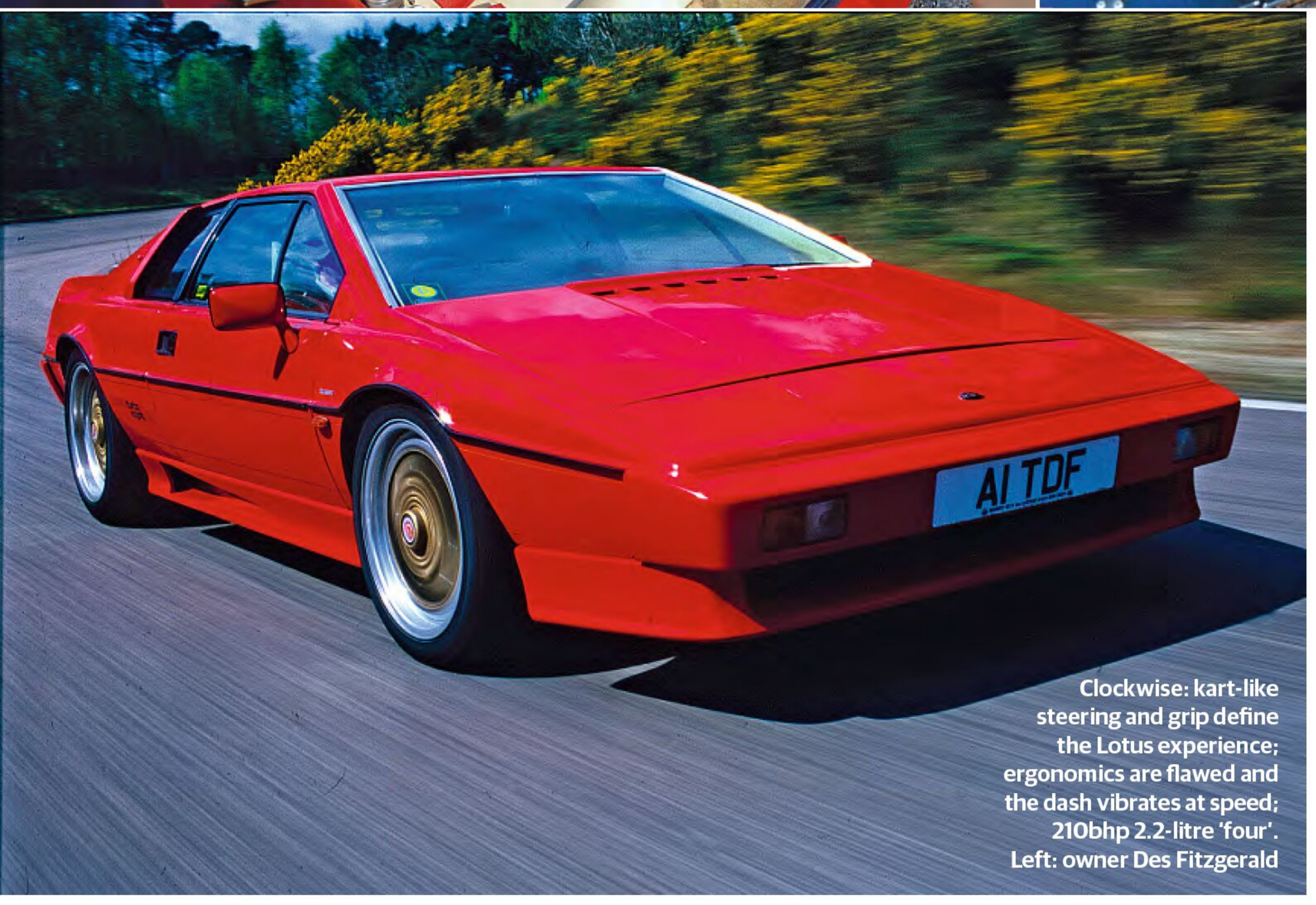


driving for you. Despite its clear competition bloodline, the 944 is well-mannered and docile while pottering, but keep your foot in past 3000rpm for the full 10.1psi of boost and there's a welcome introduction to three-figure speeds in a heartbeat, with precious little cacophony from the sweet-revving 2.5-litre 'four'. This is a seriously quick car, but conversely it doesn't really feel it. And then the problems start. Lulled into a false sense of security, you begin to press on and its shortcomings are all too obvious. The powered steering rack, with 3.2 turns from lock to lock, fails to communicate, and while turn-in is crisp, the weight of the gearbox out back means that when the tail starts to slide – and it will – you tend to over-compensate. Changing gears, however, is a joy, and you'd never be aware of the long linkage in its transaxle layout. The shift action is meaty and beautifully precise, the ride quality is firm and wind noise is well suppressed.

Other reservations mostly centre on the styling. Although well balanced, it's almost undercover-ordinary and lacks the sheer pull of more extrovert Porsches. Similarly, the interior, while commodious and beautifully screwed together, has a strangely perched driving position, while the shiny leather and acres of plastic are unimaginative let-downs.

Like the Porsche, the Mondial lacks a strong sense of identity. From a dozen paces it's patently a Ferrari, but one missing the dazzling drama expected of the marque. Perhaps it's innate snobbery: if a lesser styling house had designed this two-plus-two middie it would be lauded, but by Pininfarina's standards it's, well, a bit ordinary. The stance is spot-on, as are the proportions, but the squared-off roofline and myriad air vents and louvres blight the picture.

Step aboard and all the expected visual symbols of Ferrari heritage are there to enthral: polished H-gate, and Prancing Horse symbols galore. There's plenty of headroom and the relationship between the pedals and the oddly angled steering wheel doesn't require the usual straight-arms, legs-splayed driving stance. Unlike so many of its contemporaries, the driver's door doesn't crowd you – there's actually a surfeit of elbow room. Vision is excellent in all directions, even to the rear



Clockwise: kart-like steering and grip define the Lotus experience; ergonomics are flawed and the dash vibrates at speed; 210bhp 2.2-litre 'four'. Left: owner Des Fitzgerald

LOTUS TURBO ESPRIT

Sold/number built 1981-'87/2274
Construction steel backbone chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 2174cc 'four', twin Dell'Orto 40DHLA carburettors, Garrett T3 turbocharger
Max power 210bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 200lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** upper and lower transverse links; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 12ft (3657mm)
Width 6ft 1¼in (1859mm)
Height 3ft 7¾in (1110mm)
Wheelbase 8ft (2438mm)
Weight 2218lb (1006kg)
0-60mph 6.1 secs
Top speed 152mph **Mpg** 23
Price new £23,440 (1986)

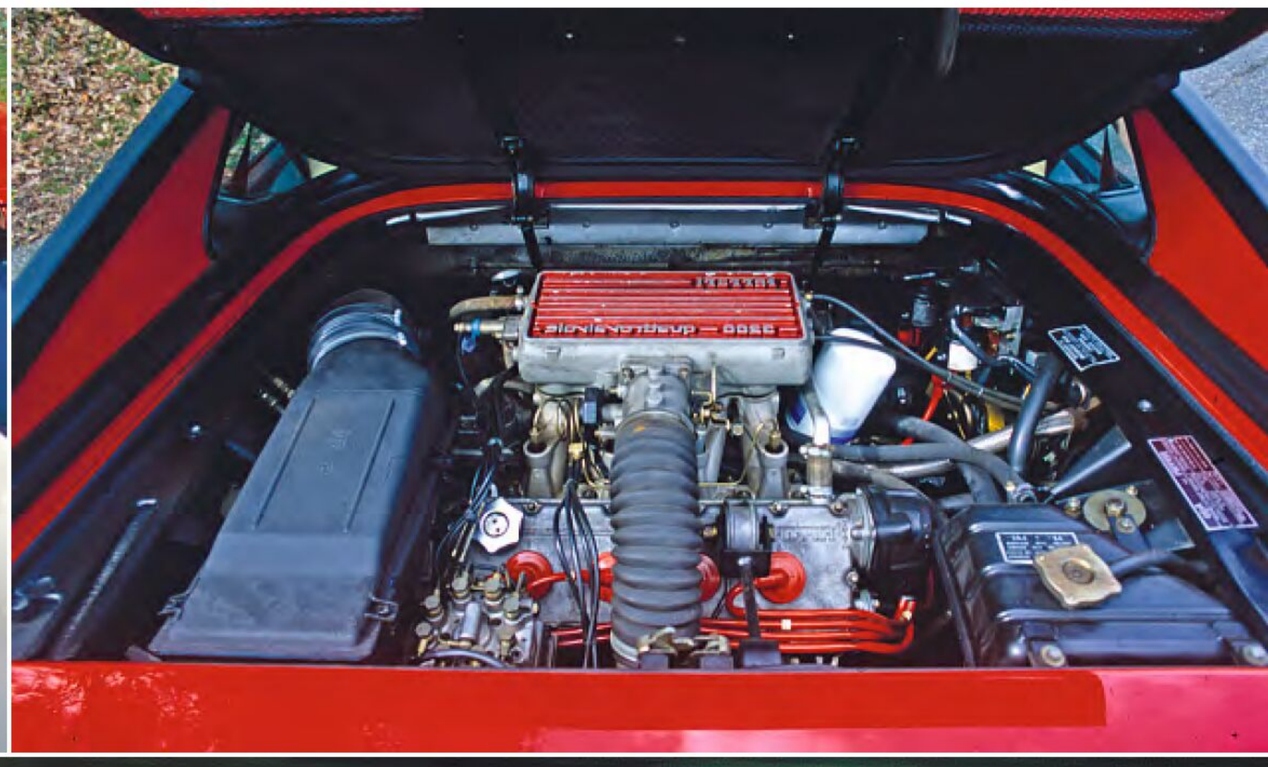
three-quarters, despite the chunky C-pillars. The Mondial's cockpit immerses you in Connolly hide, with deep, cut-pile carpet used on the floor and footwells. The instruments are grouped in an oblong binnacle containing speedometer and rev counter, a double vertical row of idiot lights between them and four minor gauges grouped near the centre. Ergonomic excellence in a Ferrari? Almost.

Twist the key and there's the familiar delicate whine of the starter followed a second later by the smooth rasp of the silken V8. Your initial impression is that the steering is indirect: it's the same system as in the 328, but here there's a foot more to the wheelbase. However, it's this additional length that gives the car such excellent straight-line stability. The Mondial's ability to hold a straight course over bumps and uneven roads is eerie. Essentially it's a shallow understeerer, but, as the steering effort builds towards the limit, the characteristic changes to mild oversteer. Most of the time, the Mondial balances out perfectly and is very much a friend: it wants to help you out. That's more than can be said for the gearbox: in time-honoured Ferrari fashion it's baulky, but, once warmed up, there's a satisfying feeling of metal on metal with each shift.

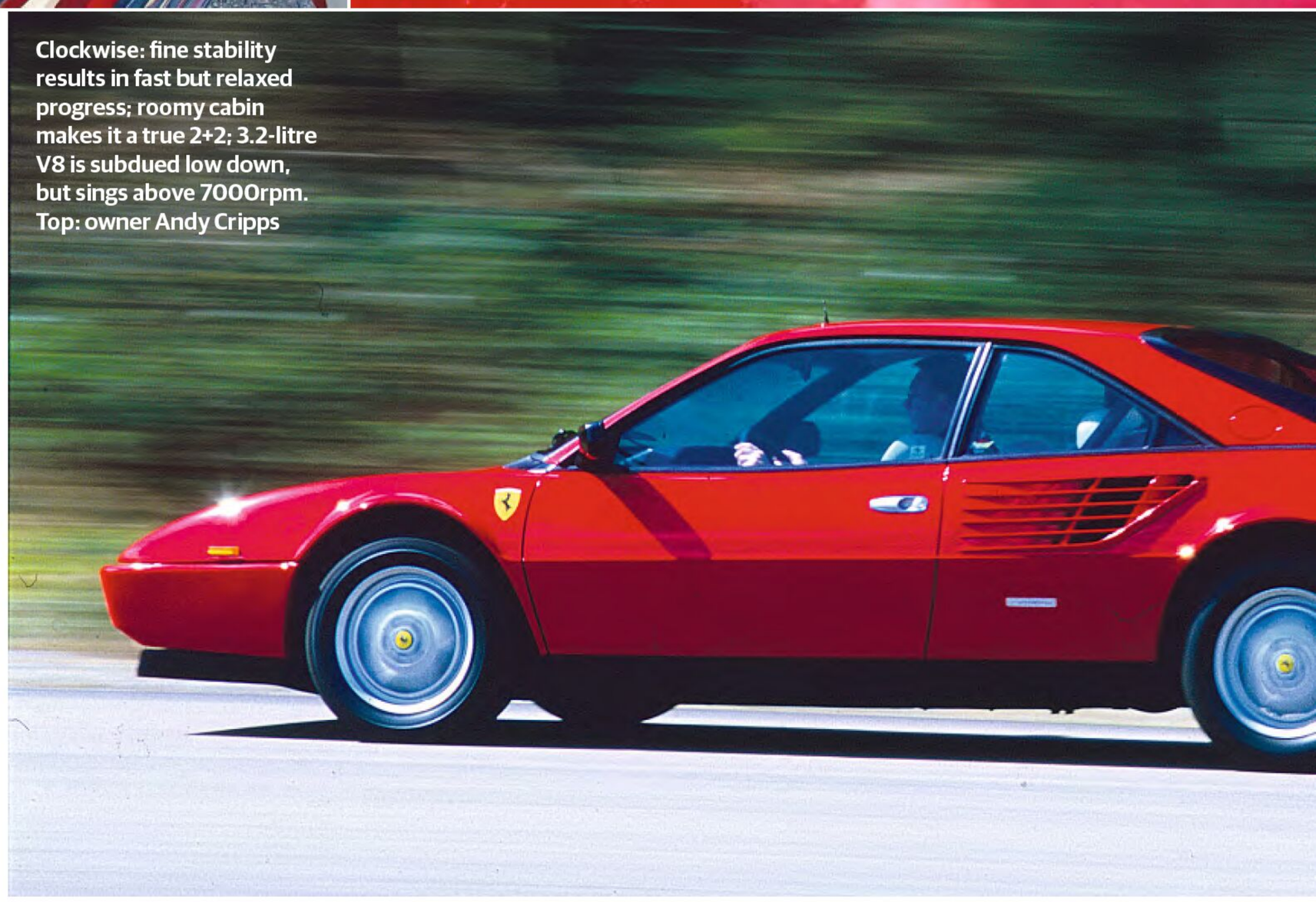
The only aspect lacking from the Mondial's make-up is a sense of urgency. It's quick but not brutally powerful; it isn't an 'any gear and open the throttle' sort of car, but there's a relaxed quality to its progress that comes as a bit of a shock. It seems churlish to rail against refinement, but where's the buzz? It doesn't sound as if it's working especially hard. Only when you're in the upper reaches of the rev band, at around 7000rpm, does it sing its little heart out. And it's a gorgeous, metallic-timbred sound that really needs to be heard.

But of all five, by far the best all-rounder is the Alpine: just marvel at the perfectly realised aesthetics for a start. From the tip of its pointy snout to the bespoilered rump, this French take on the supercar is spot-on. Riding on spoked alloy wheels (later also used on Renault's Sport Spider), it exudes a bullish air of detachment.

The purposeful brake cooling ducts down the bulging flanks, just ahead of the rear arches, along with the expansive glasshouse,



Clockwise: fine stability results in fast but relaxed progress; roomy cabin makes it a true 2+2; 3.2-litre V8 is subdued low down, but sings above 7000rpm. Top: owner Andy Cripps



FERRARI MONDIAL 3.2

Sold/number built 1985-'88/1797 (987 coupés, 810 convertibles)
Construction tubular steel frame, steel, aluminium and glassfibre panels
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 3184cc V8, Bosch K-Jetronic fuel injection
Max power 270bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque 244lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with servo
Length 15ft 2¾in (4641mm)
Width 5ft 10½in (1791mm)
Height 4ft 1½in (1260mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 8¼in (2649mm)
Weight 3125lb (1417kg)
0-60mph 5.9 secs
Top speed 155mph **Mpg** 21.8
Price new £24,448

conspire to produce a silhouette that isn't exactly pretty, just downright aggressive. Inside, the A610 is a huge improvement over the GTA it replaced, not least the fresh fascia – still moulded in plastic – that benefitted from an upgrade in switchgear. The driving position is dictated by the offset pedal arrangement, which is no hardship, and the torso-hugging *petale* seats offer support to all the right areas. All-round vision is good, if not quite in the Mondial class, while the clap-hands wipers will either amuse or infuriate.

Forget all you've heard about rear-engined cars flinging themselves off into the boondocks in an instant once you shave their limits: the A610 handles exceptionally well. Traction out of second-gear bends is breathtaking, the rear boots accepting power with hardly a squeak. Most of the time the car corners neutrally with slight understeer, but oversteer is available on tap. The feeling of intimacy, the sense of adjustability, is heightened by the variable-rate powered rack, which, with 3.3 turns between locks, is beautifully weighted so the assistance is barely perceptible. The ride is firm, but not stiff, with rock-solid body control, although there is the occasional reverberation over rutted surfaces. And then there are the brakes, which, on a dry track, exceed 1*g* of deceleration from 70mph. It takes time to adapt to the floor-mounted pedal, but the feel is sublime.

Even better, you can pick one up for less than all the others here. While the Porsche, TVR and Lotus offer more pace per pound, and the Mondial has that all-important badge value and kudos, if you're a keen driver who isn't afraid of being constantly asked 'what is it?', look no further for your adrenalin-charged thrills.

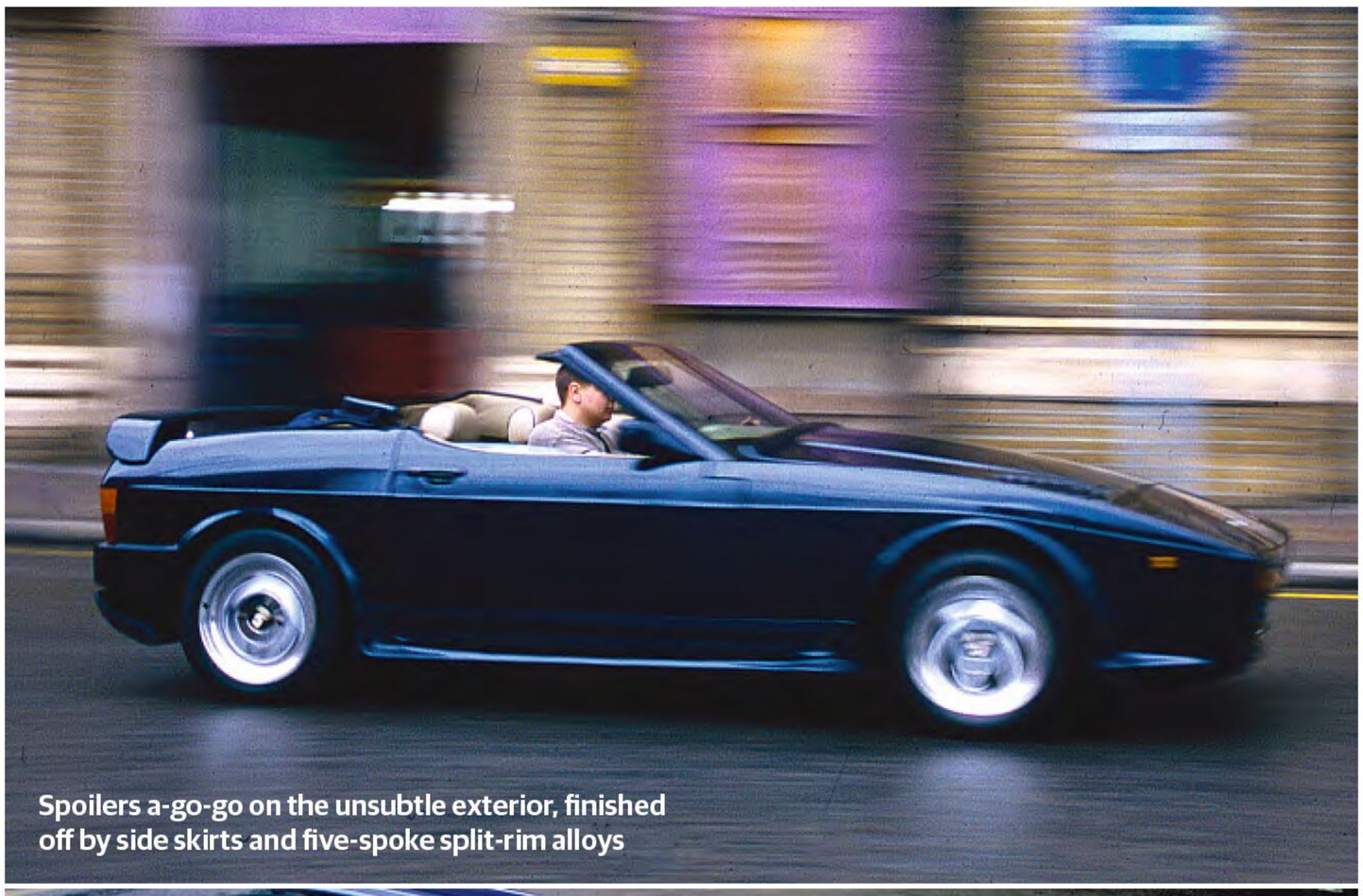
That the A610 has been so criminally overlooked for so long is a crying shame, but you secretly hope that things will stay that way. Drive one and you'll take it to your heart. So ignore it, please. We don't want anyone else to know about the Alpine's existence.

Thanks to *TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk); Lotus Drivers' Club (lotusdriversclub.org.uk); Club Alpine Renault (clubalpinerenault.org.uk); Porsche Club GB (porscheclubgb.com); Ferrari Owners' Club of Great Britain (ferrariownersclub.co.uk)*

THE FULL WEDGE

The end of the line for TVR's longest-lived sports car series was marked by the outrageous, thunderous 450SE

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



Spoilers a-go-go on the unsubtle exterior, finished off by side skirts and five-spoke split-rim alloys

Interior is well-equipped, with leather and a walnut dash. Left: the devil rides out on a '666' plate

WHAT GOES WRONG?

1 TVR wedges, like most glassfibre cars, suffer from stress cracks in the bodyshell. Check base of windscreen pillar and top of bonnet in particular.

2 The 400 and 450SE wore special 15in OZ split-rim five-spoke alloys: these are now rare, so condition is important. And their 225/50 ZR15 rubber (originally Bridgestones) can be hard to find.

3 The interior needs to be in good condition. Walnut veneer is expensive to repair and prone to cracking. Interior parts borrowed from other cars can be hard to find, so make sure it's complete.

4 TVR electrics are notoriously weak, and can be both difficult and expensive to rectify. Check that electric windows, pop-up headlights and other ancillaries are working smoothly.

5 Chin spoilers are low, particularly on the 450SE, and prone to grounding, so check for cosmetic repairs and filler.

TVR 450SE

Sold/number built 1989-'91/35
Construction tubular steel backbone with outriggers, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv 4441cc V8, electronic fuel injection
Max power 320bhp @ 5700rpm
Max torque 316lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front double wishbones **rear** four-point lower wishbones, torque reaction arms; coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo
Length 12ft (3658mm)
Width 5ft 11½in (1816mm)
Height 3ft 7½in (1105mm)
Wheelbase 7ft (2134mm)
Weight 2491lb (1130kg)
0-60mph 4.7 secs
Top speed 155mph **Mpg** 20.2
Price new £27,995 (1989)

Turn the cheap-looking, Ford-badged ignition key and the huge V8 chunters lazily before erupting in a wall of noise. Blip the throttle to clear its throat and the TVR 450SE rocks from side to side, spitting and grumbling at being woken from its slumber. Easing out on to the road, it quickly becomes obvious that this car is powered by a very different beast from the lazy, burbling V8s that wafted prime ministers around London in their Rover P5Bs.

At tickover, the 450SE sounds uncannily like a top-fuel dragster, its threatening roar hinting at the awesome power that lies beneath the bonnet. Under way, the throbbing builds steadily until the revs pass 3000rpm, when all hell breaks loose as the thumping torque propels the TVR forward at a ludicrous rate. Tyres scrabble for grip and it takes all powers of concentration to stay in a straight line as the race-bred V8 wails towards its 6000rpm redline. Lift off, and the exhaust crackles and pops in protest, urging you on – it's addictive stuff.

Turn-in is sharp, but the over-light power-assisted steering lacks feel. Well-controlled body roll means that there's no pitching under hard acceleration or braking, and it corners fast and flat, but judicious use of the accelerator pedal is needed on damp roads to prevent unwanted excursions into the scenery. This car will bite back if it's not treated with respect. The Rover-sourced gearbox is baulky, and double-declutching helps even when going up through the ratios from cold. The brakes, though effective enough, fail to live up to the fearsome performance. Intrusive noise even at tickover is wearing, yet the 450 is surprisingly docile in city traffic. Heat streams back from the big V8, cooking your feet, but it's easy to cool off by dropping the trademark user-friendly hood. And the intrusive transmission tunnel makes the driving position feel cramped.

TVR was uncharacteristically slow to cash in on the 'wedge' phenomenon. By the time the Tasmin first appeared, in 1980, most other manufacturers were already phasing out their doorstop-inspired sports cars. Designed by Oliver Winterbottom, the man responsible for the Lotus Elite and Éclat, the new model was born with Ford's Cologne 2.8-litre injected V6, but didn't truly come of age until the Rover V8-powered 350i of 1983. The new engine gave plenty of scope for tuning and allowed the model to continue selling until the early '90s.

Engine size grew progressively, culminating with the 320bhp, 4.5-litre 450SE of 1989. This final Tasmin development is a smoother, more integrated design than the earlier cars, and is neater than its wild 420SEAC sibling, whose spoiler used enough glassfibre composites to build a small yacht. Subtle, however, it is not.

Although dynamically flawed, its simple yet rewarding recipe of exhilarating acceleration and phenomenal noise brings out your inner hooligan, and the TVR is ideal for summer blasts along your favourite (ideally straight) roads. Good examples remain surprisingly affordable, and few cars will offer more power for your money, but with just 35 built, finding one could be a challenge. Buyer beware: many have been thrashed or crashed, and a bad one will be expensive to put right.

The best for less?

Open-top icons and their budget rivals go head-to-head. *Let battle commence!*

Mainstream classics have rocketed in value over the past few years, but can you have as much fun in their modern counterparts for a fraction of the price?

WORDS **SIMON CHARLESWORTH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

As the balmy weather returns, classic sports cars are lured from their winter lairs – treating the roadscape to their seductively glimmering bodywork, vocal exhausts and smiling drivers with malfunctioning hairstyles. It gets many of us yearning and thinking.

Accurately describing a 'sports car' is perhaps one of the hardest definitions to nail down – a bit like the phrase 'British'. Both are somewhat futile exercises, though, because deep down you already know what the terms mean – and summer is too short, anyway.

The term 'classic' is a different beast. Not merely because of its personal and thus subjective nature, but because of the plod of time and the desirability of established machinery. As the blue-chip marques and models have flourished, hoisting the values of many cherished classics, so enthusiasts are having to think laterally. As a result, just as eagle-eyed investors are keen to investigate pastures new, so must we.

All of which begs an interesting question: is the existing classic establishment worth the premium, or can you obtain an equal fix of the good stuff from the younger, more affordable generation of sports cars?

Here we have lined up five of the biggest names in the field, representing all shades of the British sports-car spectrum. We have paired each of them with their spiritual successors and rated them. Undoubtedly there will be mutterings of disagreement and disgruntlement – but in many cases prospective sports-car buyers could save themselves a four- or even five-figure sum.

Right, it's now time to top up the sun tan, stretch the right foot – and maybe even reach for the chequebook...

Reliant just has the edge in performance over the Lotus, but its brilliant ride and handling composure is bettered by the sublimely forgiving chassis of the Elan

LOTUS ELAN *vs* RELIANT SCIMITAR SS1

Although it was launched in 1984, work started on the Reliant SS1 in the late 1970s. It was intended to slot in between the Triumph Spitfire and MGB, but beneath the Scimitar GTE, yet the roomy and comfy SS1 ended up filling the sports-car gap left by British Leyland's corporate myopia.

Inching over a road with a surface so poor that it can only be described as post-apocalyptic, the 1800Ti is showing off its ride quality, and absence of low-volume trouble and squeak. Owner John Jenkinson is being amusingly disparaging about the Giovanni Michelotti and Tateo Uchinda styling, but, despite its pointed snout resembling a Black & Decker Dustbuster, this pioneer of the sports-car renaissance already has me hooked.

Inside, it has a very 1980s sense of chunky style, brought to you by designer Jevan Thorpe in association with red piping, plus fixtures and fittings from Ford and Austin-Rover. In this radical sports car, though, its rigid galvanised chassis and unstressed composite body don't equate to an impression of fragility.

The light, unassisted steering feels incredibly positive, although its lock is vast. The drivetrain is smooth, the Nissan five-speed gearbox faultless and the mighty acceleration – on a par with a Ford Sierra RS Cosworth – always prompts a gleeful chuckle.

At a canter, the ride and neutral handling offer a mature and resolved compromise – the all-independent set-up satisfies your inner driving-god delusion and your buttocks' need for self-preservation. The redline may be at 6000rpm, but thanks to the turbo's strong-mannered delivery, which starts at 3300rpm and looms large at its 4000rpm torque peak, you'd need a long road or a commodious pair of trousers to reach it. Only when raising the bar to a boost-assisted gallop through flowing esses will you notice slightly greater roll, due to the iron-block Nissan 'four' being heavier than the Ford CVH unit used in other SS1s.

Yet such minutiae are immaterial, because this car is a delightful surprise. It's a shame they are so scarce – blame those looks, plus quality and build problems – because the 1800Ti is a blast and remains stunning value.

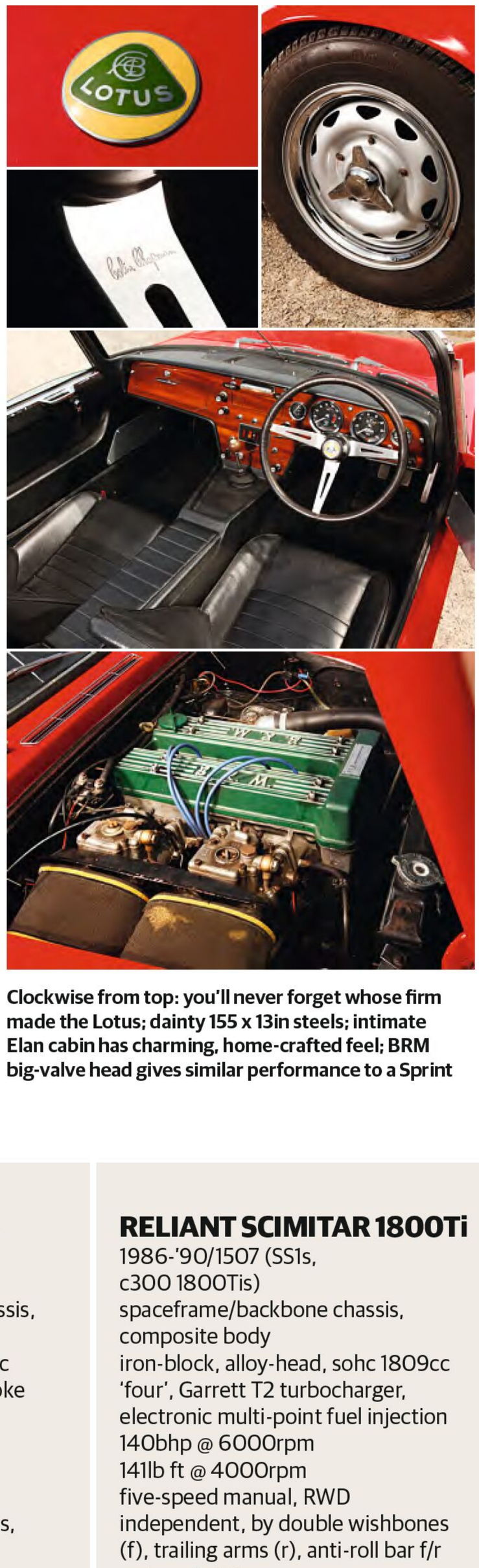
Over to the petite Lotus and it does look like a car that needs a 50p piece to start it. This time, that sense of kit-car frailty – whether it's the wobblevision rear-view mirror or the delicate trim – is present, as is a dashboard that looks like a Smiths display cabinet knocked up in O-level woodwork.

The Elan evolved from Lotus founder Colin Chapman's plan to replace the Elite with another glassfibre monocoque, but powered by a Ford Kent-based twin-cam with an alloy head by Harry Mundy. A backbone chassis mule was built for testing, but such was its rigidity and low cost that it was signed off for production.

Driving a sweeping rural road in an Elan feels like a reflex action, similar to muscle memory. It's almost as if you're watching someone else salivating over an idyllic drive. The car conveys uncorrupted information with a deftness of touch, suggesting that its sublime steering and chassis have been magically woven from gossamer by elves. The sharp, slicing action of the gearbox. The blissful rasping gargle of that Weber-fed motor. The deliciously balanced and adjustable cornering attitude. Chapman's best road car really does defy time and thumb its perfectly proportioned nose to the concept of progress.

Thanks to *Andrew Orrock; Ed Braclik at Frontline Developments (frontline-cars.co.uk); John Jenkinson, Matt Greenly and Philip Andrew at the Reliant Sabre and Scimitar Owners' Club (scimitarweb.co.uk)*

'The SS1's mighty acceleration – on a par with a Sierra RS Cosworth – always prompts a chuckle'



Clockwise from top: you'll never forget whose firm made the Lotus; dainty 155 x 13in steels; intimate Elan cabin has charming, home-crafted feel; BRM big-valve head gives similar performance to a Sprint

Clockwise from top: set-square design with '80s Austin-Ford parts-bin fusion; smart alloys; solidly built but dark dashboard is offset by two-tone trim and red piping; Nissan motor sits well back for superb balance

	LOTUS ELAN S3 S/E	RELIANT SCIMITAR 1800Ti
Sold/number built	1966-'68/1450 (S3 dhcs, 9245 all series)	1986-'90/1507 (SS1s, c300 1800Tis)
Construction	folded-steel backbone chassis, glassfibre body	spaceframe/backbone chassis, composite body
Engine	iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 1558cc 'four', two twin-choke Weber carburettors	iron-block, alloy-head, sohc 1809cc 'four', Garrett T2 turbocharger, electronic multi-point fuel injection
Max power	118bhp @ 6000rpm	140bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque	108lb ft @ 4000rpm	141lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission	four-speed manual, RWD	five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension	independent, by wishbones, anti-roll bar (f), struts (r)	independent, by double wishbones (f), trailing arms (r), anti-roll bar f/r
Steering	rack and pinion	rack and pinion
Brakes	discs (with servo on S/E)	discs, with servo
Weight	1534lb (696kg)	1969lb (893kg)
0-60mph	7.6 secs	6.8 secs
Top speed	118mph	128mph
Price new	£1435	£9750
Driving	●●●●●●●●●○	●●●●●●●○○○
Practicality	●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●○○
Character	●●●●●●●●●○	●●●●●○○○○
Value	●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●●○
Usability	●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●○○
	TOTAL 40	TOTAL 38

OR YOU COULD HAVE...

Honda S800

1966-'70, 11,536 built, 0-60mph 13.4 secs, 94mph, 35mpg

Briefly with chain-drive, the S800 could only be a Honda. Available with or without a roof, and with a 791cc quad-carb twin-cam and a redline all the way from 8000-11,000rpm. A very Japanese alternative to Spridgets and Spitfires, with Elan-like vim and vigour, it's undeniably cute, makes a chainsaw sound and paved the way for all future performance Hondas.

John Powell's 15,000-mile '85 Kallista is original bar a respray; John Beskeen's immaculate '69 Plus 8 is fresh from a concours-standard restoration

PANTHER KALLISTA *vs* MORGAN PLUS 8

This pairing will no doubt prompt grumblings. Comparing a Morgan with a Panther will be viewed by Malvern apostles as heresy. To Pantherphiles – many of whom too often have to explain that, no, their car is neither a Morgan nor a kit-car – it will have pained familiarity. Take a neutral view, though, and the back-to-back stands.

A continuation of the retro-style aesthetic established by Robert Jankel's ladder-chassis, glassfibre-bodied Lima from the 1970s, the 1982 Kallista borrowed from Ford – rather than using Vauxhall Viva/Magnum components – and came with an aluminium body. It begs the question: was Panther Westwinds – later the Panther Car Co – among the first to embrace retro styling for its cars?

Available with a 1.6-litre 'four' or 2.8/2.9-litre Cologne V6s, Kallistas were mostly built in Surrey at Byfleet and Weybridge until 1990. Production was briefly transferred to Korea in 1992 for a further 78 cars, after the company was acquired by SsangYong.

The driving position is certainly distinctive. The cabin and footwell are tight on width but not cramped, the wheel is high and close to the chest – encouraging a driving posture akin to a Jack Russell begging – and you have to reach for the five-speed's long gearstick. Then there's the partly veneered dash, peppered with VDO dials and Ford switchgear that merrily shouts 'humbug' to the science of ergonomics.

Its behaviour, though, with good, crisp turn-in and easy handling – better on the smaller-engined models – plus a degree of ride quality and usability that Morgan's sliding-pillar suspension couldn't really hope to match, more than makes up for any nitpicking.

A pure sports car it ain't, though. Yes, the V6 emits a fruity gargle past 3000rpm, but it only serves to emphasise the sports-tourer bent of the Kallista. It will understeer when exuberance overtakes judgement, but for all of its pre-war square-riggerness, this long-bonneted automotive pastiche drives like a well-behaved child of the '80s.

Really, the view along the Kallista's bonnet is the only single element that vaguely resembles driving a Morgan. Objectively, judge the dynamics of both cars and the Kallista wins, but then we are talking about classic cars here.

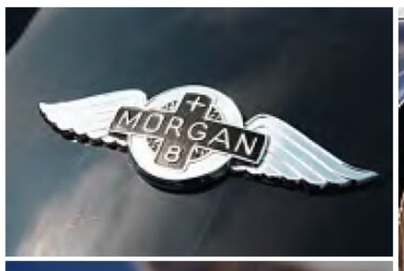
The differences of opinion between Morgan enthusiasts and critics are almost strong enough to be called sectarian: with these cars, few sit on the fence. So what are you expecting? How a chassis with the sophistication of a Victorian bedstead can only benefit a dentist? No. Morgans are a taste I acquired long ago.

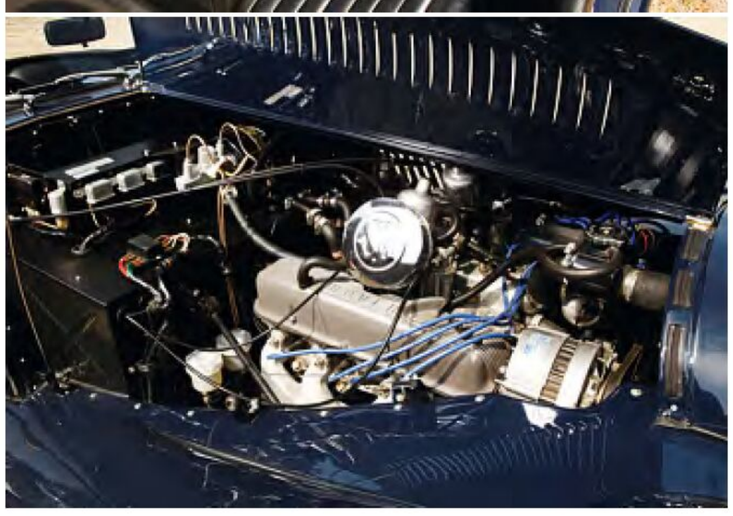
John Beskeen's just-rebuilt 1969 Plus 8 feels freshly minted, with its only concession to practicality being two seats, a hood and sidescreens. The steering box is prone to wander off topic and the infamous ride is firm, but the merriment is intense. Hurtle along – the Rover V8's offbeat score growls in intensity at 3000rpm until it mimics being pursued by an angry chapter of Hells Angels – and throw it into a bend. Then you'll understand why people smile when they're driving a Morgan. You can't help but beam. Roll is minimal, the handling is predominantly neutral with an ultimate understeer bias, there's loads of grip and all the controls are muscular and acutely involving.

The bad news is that values of Moss-gearbox Plus 8s (1968-'72) have risen markedly, but the good news is that Peter Morgan's mad hot rod was built for another 32 years after that.

Thanks to *John Powell, Jack Kemp, Terry Borton and Val Bridges, Panther Car Club (panthercarclub.com); John Beskeen and Dennis J Duggan, OffaMog, Morgan Sports Car Club (morgansportscarclub.com)*

'Judged objectively on dynamics, the Kallista wins, but we are talking about classic cars here'





Clockwise from top: famous badge and neat bonnet catch; 185 x 15 tyres on early alloys; lovely patinated leather and Moto-Lita wheel; high-compression V8 made the Morgan as quick as a V12 Jaguar E-type

Clockwise from top: eponymous animal brand; wires now sport 185/60 x 15 tyres; odd mixture of wood with '80s VDO dials, but quality is superb; V6 gives laid-back character – carb replaces injection on this car

	MORGAN PLUS 8	PANTHER KALLISTA 2.8
Sold/number built	1968-2004/c6000	1982-'90/1437
Construction	z-section ladder chassis, aluminium body over timber frame	box-type ladder chassis, aluminium body
Engine	all-alloy, ohv 3530cc V8, twin SU HS6 carburettors	all-iron, ohv 2792cc V6, electronic fuel injection
Max power	184bhp @ 5200rpm	150bhp @ 5700rpm
Max torque	226lb ft @ 3000rpm	159lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission	four-speed manual, RWD	five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension	independent, by vertical sliding pillars (f), beam axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs (r)	independent, by double wishbones (f), live axle, trailing arms (r)
Steering	cam and peg	rack and pinion
Brakes	discs (f), drums (r), with servo	discs (f), drums (r), with servo
Weight	1884lb (851kg)	2073lb (940kg)
0-60mph	6.7 secs	7.5 secs
Top speed	134mph	120mph
Price new	£14,755	£6800
Driving	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●○○○
Practicality	●●●●●●○○○○	●●●●●●●○○○
Character	●●●●●●●●●●	●●●●●●○○○○
Value	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●●○○
Usability	●●●●●●○○○○	●●●●●●●○○○
	TOTAL 37	TOTAL 35

OR YOU COULD HAVE...

Caterham Seven

1973-date, c4000 built, 0-60mph 6.5 secs, 106mph, 29mpg

It started life as the Lotus Six's successor and is still going strong as a much-mimicked track-day hero. Available in a bewildering range of engine/model combos, from the tame 1600 Crossflow (see the performance figures above) to the faintly bonkers CSR 260. Ideally, go for the greater control of a de Dion-axle car and nothing will ever be the same again.

Late-'80s, renaissance-era TVR S3 makes a splendid spiritual successor to the rustic, entertaining charms of a TR4; practical Surrey top predated targa

TVR S3 *vs* TRIUMPH TR4

Recall the lineage of the Triumph TR range – especially with Roger Morris' TR4 sitting next to Stuart Bradbury's TVR S3 – and you have to wonder why on earth British Leyland gave up the bloodline. It abandoned macho involvement and instead opted for a gimmicky wedge based on the platform of a never-realised saloon and tugged along by an engine that felt as weak as water.

As with all TRs, the dash sets the mood, but the TR4 is not endowed with that good a driving position. The controls are offset and there's not much room for my generous 6ft 1in frame, creating a mild corkscrew posture.

The TR4 was the first major evolutionary jump in the genus, when Giovanni Michelotti abandoned the look of the early, sidescreen-equipped cars for something far more modern, refined and cohesive. Underneath the 1961 TR4's sharp Italian couture, though, was a chassis and drivetrain that inherited most of its predecessor's components. Then chief engineer Harry Webster introduced independent rear suspension on the car in '64, to create the TR4A, and sparked a lively debate about which is the better sports car.

The overdrive four-speed 'box is a peach: it's positive and flows across the gate. The 2138cc 'four' is coarse – it began life as a Continental Aero Engines stationary motor – but feels as if its internals are hewn from granite. It oozes torque, so you won't be bothering its 5000rpm redline unless you're a card-carrying sadist.

The TR4 corners well, slotting through snaking complexes with the odd hop, skip and jump from the live rear axle – adding to the vigour of the experience. The steering, with its tasty combination of just enough weight, information and linearity, contributes much to the enjoyment, too. Overall, the sharp-suited TR4 blends near-MGA levels of precision with the tempered gung-ho nature of a Healey 100.

Transferring from 1960s Canley to 1980s Blackpool, aboard the TVR S3 it's like being plugged into a socket. The driving position is low and reclined, the centre console is high and you can't really see what goes where in the dim and distant footwell. The S was the first new TVR launched under Peter Wheeler. Owing much to the models of the 1960s and '70s, the '86 2.8S or 280S was the first demonstration of Wheeler's keen market intuition. The later 290S or S2 has a 2.9-litre V6, the S3 a better dash.

The only criticism of the wood 'n' leather interior is that the gearlever is a bit too far aft on the transmission tunnel, but you soon adapt. Set your right foot for 'long-winded TVR throttle mode' and send the revs rising. Past 3000 and then 4000rpm, the 2.9 Ford Cologne V6 is note-perfect in its impression of a V8. Its wailing vibrato startles the Brecon sheep.

There really is only one way to drive a TVR, because that addictive howling exhaust goads you on – almost inferring: 'That's right mate, go on, give it some!' It then stirs you further with quick, muted steering that requires only a twitch of the wrists. The S3 is rapid and corners flat, with only the faintest sniff of roll. It's a fun, hedonistic tune with an infectious rhythm.

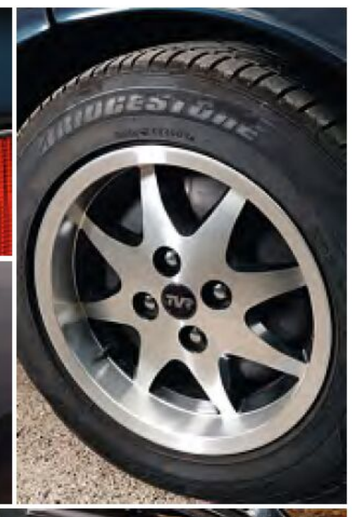
Is it sensible and practical, though? Yes. The cabin is roomy, with plenty of width, and the dash is straightforward and smartly dressed. The only criticism is that the bonnet flexes when the Tarmac turns wrinkly, making its trailing edge shiver. The ride is firm but comfortable, and the simple two-part roof makes so much sense that you wonder why it isn't a more commonplace arrangement.

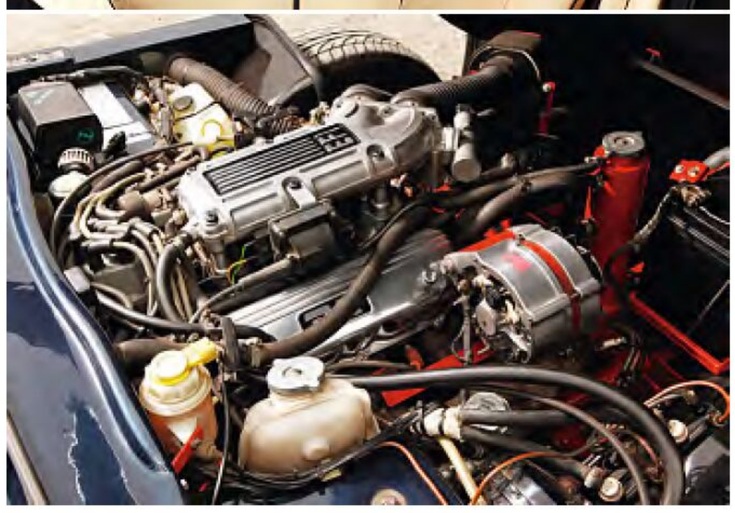
Thanks to *Dave Matthews and Stuart Bradbury, TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk); Carey Prior, Y Ddraig Goch TR Register (tr-register.co.uk); Roger Morris*

'The sharp-suited TR4 blends near-MGA levels of precision with an Austin-Healey's gung-ho nature'

Clockwise from top: Canley badge; wire wheels look spot-on with full-profile rubber; original sprung wheel frames Jaeger speedo and tacho; tractable 2.2 'four' sports SUs, but later cars had Strombergs

Clockwise from top: firm named after founder Trevor Wilkinson; chunky 205/60 x 15 tyres on sharp alloys; wood-rim Momo wheel finishes off timber 'n' hide cockpit; injected V6 does a fine impression of a V8





	TRIUMPH TR4	TVR S3
Sold/number built	1961-'67/40,253	1986-'94/2604 (all Ss)
Construction	steel backbone chassis, steel body	steel spaceframe chassis, glassfibre body
Engine	all-iron, ohv 2138cc 'four', twin SU or Stromberg carburettors	all-iron, ohv 2936cc V6, electronic fuel injection
Max power	105bhp @ 4750rpm	168bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque	132lb ft @ 3000rpm	170lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission	four-speed manual, o/d, RWD	five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension	independent, by double wishbones (f), live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs (r)	independent by double, wishbones, coil springs anti-roll bar f/r
Steering	rack and pinion	rack and pinion
Brakes	discs (f), drums (r)	discs (f), drums (r)
Weight	2240lb (1016kg)	1984lb (900kg)
0-60mph	11 secs	7 secs
Top speed	108mph	135mph
Price new	£949 (with hardtop)	£21,029
Driving	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●●○
Practicality	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●○○
Character	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●○
Value	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●●○
Usability	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●○○○
	TOTAL 37	TOTAL 42

OR YOU COULD HAVE...

BMW Z3 2.2

1995-2002, 263,951 built, 0-60mph 7.9 secs, 139mph, 30mpg

Compare this to its predecessor and successor, and you'll wonder what happened. Built and engineered to a budget using obsolete semi-trailing-arm rear suspension (that worked better in the older models), the odd-looking Z3 is distinctly average and won't leave you shaken or stirred. Sweet six-cylinder engine is its saving grace; plenty to choose from, too.

As practical as they come: the 'new' MGB meets the original, but does our man prefer the Mazda's rev-happy modernity or the B's bountiful torque?

MAZDA MX-5 *vs* MGB

You can't get more mainstream than these two, the current and former title-holders of 'the world's most popular sports car'.

In production for 18 years, the enduring MGB had little time for retirement before becoming a cornerstone of the classic-car arena. Abingdon's first full monocoque sports car was designed to appeal to a broader demographic than its sportier, uncompromising predecessor, the MGA.

Few sports cars have managed the aesthetic balance between pretty and muscular, but the MGB is one of them. Inside, its crackle-finished, wire-sprung familiarity brings with it a sense of relaxation. It is the most spacious car here, being the only one to offer legroom that's surplus to my requirements. Created by Syd Enever, Peter Neal, Peter O'Neill, Don Hayter, Terry Mitchell and Roy Brocklehurst, the B drew its bonnet line from EX181, the 'roaring raindrop' record-breaker. Its rear end bears a strong resemblance to the restyled '61 Spridget.

Graham Dix's completely standard 1967 Mk1 is incredibly reassuring to drive. Its rack-and-pinion steering is positive, with good weighting and eager turn-in. The ride is compliant yet connected, and the oiled action of the slick gearbox is deeply satisfying. On paper, the specification of the 1798cc B-series doesn't really excite, but when breathing through the MGB's exhaust manifold, husky-voiced magic happens and I feel a yearning coming on.

It is serene, easy and flexible when you sit back and enjoy the view. Yet it provides sufficient fun and games – accompanied by roll and increased steering load – when you're in the mood for some apex-bothering. The rev-counter starts turning red at 6000rpm, but in a standard B you'll never venture near that sort of engine speed because that's not what the torquesome 'four' is all about.

Unlike Andrew Fearon's early MX-5 and its 1598cc twin-cam, which needs to be worked hard to make your hair dance. It revs like mad, with the engine coming on cam at 3500rpm on course to giving 113bhp at a haughty 6500rpm.

The MX-5 was sired following a conversation between Mazda R&D chief Kenichi Yamamoto and former West Coast editor of *AutoWeek* Bob Hall, lamenting the death of the mass-market British sports car. The final mixer was the combined efforts of Mark Jordan, Britain's IAD, Toshihiko Hirai, Masao Yagi, Wu-Huang Chin, Tsutomo Matano and Koichi Hayashi.

Its ethos was simple – *Jinbai ittai*, meaning 'rider and horse as one' – and Hall's own Elan, plus an MGB, Spitfire and Spridget were so thoroughly evaluated during development that it's easy to spot their influences. When it came to signing off the new car, Mazda's new president – by then, one Kenichi Yamamoto – didn't hesitate. Cue a global sales smash.

The sports car orthodox in me always had an issue with the MX-5's join-the-dot development approach: build a car with the broad market appeal and size of the MGB, ice it with the brilliance and aesthetics of the Elan and then – the cheek of it – dust it all with impeccable Japanese reliability. Just a shame that its styling doesn't blaze its own original trail.

Get in and these curmudgeonly musings evaporate. It's roomy, has deliciously tactile control surfaces and a simple retro cabin with perfect ergonomics. Go for a spin and you'll deny you were ever a non-believer: it eclipses the B's dynamics and even – whisper it – gets uncomfortably close to the Elan, trading more grip for less immediacy, noise and adjustability.

Thanks to *Graham Dix and John Watson of the MG Car Club's MGB Register (mgcc.co.uk); Andrew Fearon, MX-5 Owners' Club (mx5oc.co.uk)*

'The MX-5's ethos was simple – rider and horse as one – and its influences are easy to spot'

Clockwise from top: Abingdon octagon and neat handle; 165 x 14 tyres on wires; definitive sports-car cabin with crackle dash and sprung wheel; B-series engine bay is beyond mint, with exacting detail

Clockwise from top: treasured Matano signature; alloy design apes Minilites; cabin is lifted by non-standard seats, with Momo wheel for early cars; peaky 1.6-litre twin-cam needs to be worked but relishes lots of revs

	MGB	MAZDA MX-5
Sold/number built	1962-'80/512,112	1989-'97/424,350
Construction	steel monocoque, aluminium bonnet	steel monocoque, aluminium bonnet and bootlid
Engine	all-iron, ohv 1798cc 'four', twin SU HS4 carburettors	all-alloy, dohc 1598cc 'four', electronic fuel injection
Max power	95bhp @ 5400rpm	114bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque	110lb ft @ 3000rpm	100lb ft @ 5500rpm
Transmission	four-speed manual, optional overdrive, RWD	five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension	independent, by wishbones, anti-roll bar (f), beam axle, semi-elliptic springs (r)	independent, by double, wishbones coil springs, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering	rack and pinion	rack and pinion
Brakes	discs (f), drums (r), with servo	discs, vented (f), with servo
Weight	2030lb (921kg)	2182lb (991kg)
0-60mph	12.1 secs	9.1 secs
Top speed	108mph	114mph
Price new	£870	£14,249
Driving	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●●○○
Practicality	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●○○
Character	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●○○○○
Value	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●●○
Usability	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●○○
	TOTAL 39	TOTAL 39

OR YOU COULD HAVE...

Lotus Elan M100

1989-'95, 4655 built, 0-60mph 6.5 secs, 137mph, 32mpg

The only front-wheel-drive Lotus to date is rapid across country – particularly with the turbocharged Isuzu twin-cam SE motor – has love-it-or-loathe-it looks courtesy of Peter Stevens, and is a detached if grippy driving experience. S1 and S2 versions were built, including 180 seldom-seen naturally aspirated S1s. The Lotus you really can use every day.

Pint-sized Cappuccino and Frogeye squeeze into one lane of a back-road – with room to spare. Funny how high-tech and old-world charm can feel so similar

SUZUKI CAPPUCCINO *vs* AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE

Speaking as Spridget owner, the honourable thing to do is admit a declaration of interest. Otherwise it would be tempting to waffle on a bit, fudge it and gift it to the Frogeye. Yet the more you drive a Cappuccino, the more familiar it feels. Not just in its intentions or even its dimensions; it goes deeper than that. There are so many Spridget influences that this has to be the closest pairing here.

There's the driving position: pedals off to the right, wheel slightly to the left. A right-hand indicator stalk. There's even the same shimmy of scuttle shake. Dynamically, the *déjà vu* continues with lots of grinning and directness, but the benefit of progress makes the little Suzuki more refined, faster and, thanks to its clever fold-away hardtop, more practical.

Even the cars' backgrounds aren't a million miles apart. The Suzuki grew from a proposal unveiled at the Tokyo motor show in the late '80s. It was intended solely for the Japanese *kei*-class market, with the aim of recreating a sporting image for the firm. Suzuki Motor Co and Suzuki GB later modified the Cappuccino to comply with the UK's National Type Approval and 1110 cars would be officially imported.

The Sprite, meanwhile, can be traced back to 1956 when, following the success of the brand-building exercise that was the Healey 100, BMC's Leonard Lord spoke to Donald Healey about a mass-produced entry-level sports car.

The big difference lies in the engineering: the 'Frogeye' would use the conservative underpinnings of the new Austin A35 with a few alterations (rear quarter-elliptic springs and Morris Minor steering rack). Not so the Cappuccino, which sports aluminium double wishbones, speed-sensitive power steering and a tiny marvel of an engine. Packing three cylinders, twin cams and an intercooled turbocharger, the 657cc gem develops 63bhp. Suddenly the Frogeye's specification and 43bhp 948cc pushrod 'four' look their age.

The five-speed gearbox in Paul Treby's Cappuccino isn't far behind the MX-5's for speed and precision – that's how good it is. Its tiddly triple hollers and sniggers when the turbo kicks in at 4000rpm. As it tickles the 8500rpm redline, your ears are wooed by a distinct lullaby of serrated scream backed up by whistling and sneezing blower.

The Lilliputian dimensions make both cars perfect for storming British country roads, allowing you to drift on the lawful side of the white line – but the Suzuki has the edge, backed up by a first-class set of stoppers. Of the two, the Cappuccino rides better and is roomier.

Paul Batts' Frogeye benefits from a Ford Type 9 five-speed 'box and a 1275cc engine. Sweet though a stock Frogeye is, drum brakes, a 948cc A-series plus a yawning gulf between second and third gears all conspire to make reaching 60mph a teeth-gritting challenge.

The Frogeye probably vies with the Morgan for least practical daily transport, because it lacks an attached hood, locking doors and external boot access. Also, if you have the shoulders of a steam boiler, then you can look out of scale driving one – like a duck egg teetering on an eggcup.

So, have I been converted by the Cappo? Nearly. The power steering is direct if a touch clinical, but it is not as feelsome as the Sprite's unassisted rack. The Suzuki also lacks the Healey's stripped-down purity. Drive a Sprite and you question the validity of modern cars' gadgets, grip and bulk, because it is proof positive that to have a great time in a sports car all you need is less, not more.

Thanks to *ClubCappo (clubcappo.co.uk); Frontline Developments (frontline-cars.co.uk)*

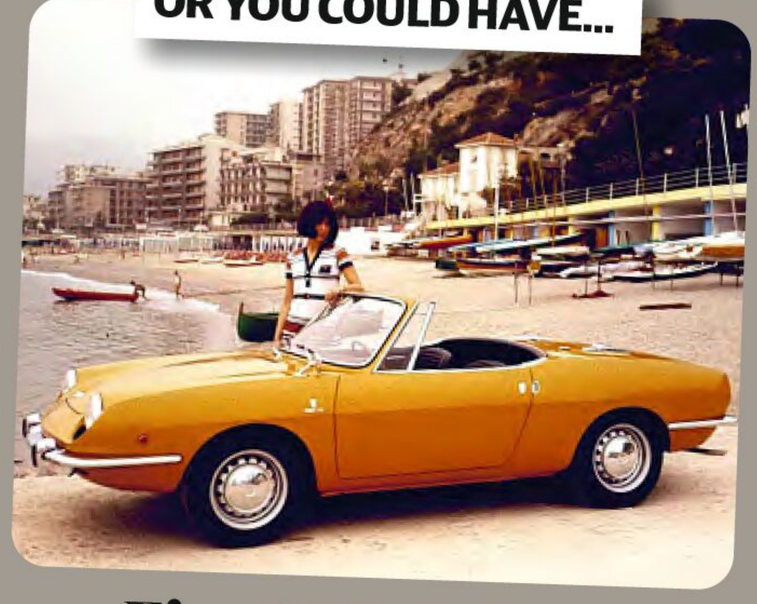
'These two cars' Lilliputian dimensions allow you to drift on the lawful side of the white line'

Clockwise from top: 'Frogeye' light; non-standard Minilites wear 165/70 x 13 tyres; chunky aftermarket Moto-Lita wheel and drilled pedals inside; all-iron pushrod 1275cc A-series feels willing and lively

Clockwise from top: stylish script; neat vents; 185/60 x 14 tyres on seven-spoke alloys; buckets? Check. Slick shift? Check. Sports wheel? Check; punchy all-alloy, twin-cam, intercooled turbocharged 657cc triple

	AUSTIN-HEALEY SPRITE	SUZUKI CAPPUCCINO
Sold/number built	1958-'61/48,987	1991-'97/28,010
Construction	steel semi-monocoque	steel monocoque
Engine	all-iron, ohv 948cc 'four', twin SU H1 carburettors	all-alloy, dohc 657cc triple, intercooled turbocharger, electronic fuel injection
Max power	43bhp @ 5200rpm	63bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque	52lb ft @ 3300rpm	63lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission	four-speed manual, RWD	five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension	independent, by double wishbones (f), live axle, quarter-elliptic leaf springs (r)	independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar f/r; multiple links (r)
Steering	rack and pinion	power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes	drums	discs, vented (f), with servo
Weight	1466lb (665kg)	1497lb (680kg)
0-60mph	23 secs	11.3 secs
Top speed	83mph	83mph
Price new	£679	£11,995
Driving	●●●●●●●●○○	●●●●●●●●○○
Practicality	●●●●●●○○○○	●●●●●●○○○
Character	●●●●●●●●●●	●●●●●●○○○
Value	●●●●●●●○○○	●●●●●●●●○○
Usability	●●●●●●○○○○	●●●●●●●●○○
	TOTAL 37	TOTAL 38

OR YOU COULD HAVE...



Fiat 850 Spider

1965-'73, 124,660 built, 0-50mph 11.4 secs, 93mph, 35mpg (est)

Launched at Geneva in '65, Bertone's beautiful little rear-engined Spider is a rare sight these days. You can probably guess why... Yep, rot. When Fiat dropped the 850 in favour of the 127/128, the fun-filled Spider wasn't replaced, which is worth shedding a tear over. You could argue that its spirit lived on (sort of) in the MGF: cute bug eyes, engine behind you, slick steering.

MARQUE MAKERS

The Boxster and Griffith saved Porsche and TVR from oblivion, and now these junior supercars are more affordable than ever

WORDS **ANDREW FRANKEL** PHOTOGRAPHY **DAVID SHEPHERD**

Imagine you locked two design teams in separate studios and told each to create a two-seater, rear-wheel-drive convertible roadster that was as good to drive as it was to look at. You might think that two similar cars would emerge. Had these teams belonged to BMW and Mercedes, you would have been right. But what if those companies were linked neither by country nor competition? What if all they had in common was an almost unsurpassed capacity for original thought? What if they were Porsche and TVR?

It would be hard to imagine two more different approaches to fundamentally the same brief than those that resulted in the Porsche Boxster and TVR Griffith. On the one hand you have the steel-bodied sophisticate, a monocoque, multi-valve and mid-engined marvel of German sports-car excellence. On the other, the Blackpool rock, making up in force what it lacks in technology. Its chassis is tubular and its body is plastic, but few would argue that the result was less than phenomenal.

At launch in 1992, the Griffith was the first of a new generation of TVRs, and it was the one that did more than any other to advance the firm's image from one barely elevated above that of the kit-car builder to the place it went on to enjoy as a respected constructor of outrageously fast and brutal sports cars. The formula of putting a large engine in the nose of a glassfibre body with a steel spaceframe chassis was by no means new to TVR, but in the Griffith the brew, more potent and tempting than ever, appeared suddenly to come right.

The birth of the Boxster was somewhat different. These days, in which Porsche's profits-to-turnover ratio is the envy of the entire motor industry, it is easy to forget that in the early 1990s you would have struggled to find a single respected analyst who reckoned Porsche could survive on its own. Huge costs brought on by extravagant over-engineering, coupled with slow sales of excellent but unfashionable products, had taken Porsche to the edge of the abyss – and it was the Boxster that brought it back again.

If ever there was a pragmatic Porsche, this was it. Forced to share more than half its componentry – including its bodywork from the A-pillar forward – with the forthcoming 996, launched the year after the Boxster in 1997, it gambled everything on the hunch that an up-to-date and affordable Porsche would strike sparks with the public in the way that its existing antiquated and expensive line-up had failed. By Porsche standards it would not be fast, but its engine would still be mounted behind the driver and retain the signature flat-six configuration, even if it was cooled by what you drank, rather than what you breathed. It displaced 2.5 litres and produced 204bhp, directed to the rear wheels through a five-speed gearbox. That was enough to push the Boxster to around 140mph, passing 60mph in 6.5 secs or so *en route*. It was fast, but scarcely ferocious.

In contrast, 'ferocious' was the very first word that popped into my startled head the first time I drove a Griffith in 1992. Having been staggered by no more than how damned beautiful the thing was, it soon sought to show it could deliver in full on the promise of those looks. The 240bhp output of its pushrod Rover

V8 engine might not sound like the basis for an overwhelming performance advantage over the Boxster, but when you threw in a one-tonne kerbweight – more than 200kg less than the Porsche – and then took the difference in torque into account, the picture became clearer. The figure that matters most, what you actually feel when you accelerate, is the torque-to-weight ratio: the Boxster has 141lb ft per tonne, while the Griffith musters 281lb ft per tonne. Even this, the lowest-powered of the five Rover V8 variants offered by the factory in its decade of production, would scorch the Griff past 60mph in little more than 5 secs and beyond 150mph. Its performance is not better than the Boxster's: it's in a different league.

But then we all know that at least half of the fun we have in classics is derived not from what they do, but the way they do it. While the TVR

'The Porsche's straight-line disadvantage is regained by not having to slow much for corners'

would undoubtedly leave the Boxster choking in its uncatalysed exhaust fumes in a straight line, there's no doubt that the purists will prefer the Porsche's attitude to a twisting road. Even by modern standards, grip levels are among the highest, allowing a lot of the Porsche's straight-line disadvantage to be regained through the simple expedient of not having to slow very much for the corners. The power-assisted helm is alive with feel, the car's natural balance, safety and composure an absolute given.

The Griffith never really approaches these standards. Its chassis feels, and is, agricultural next to the Porsche. It rides less well, is more easily upset by camber and surface changes, with more steering kickback, and ultimately can become quite wayward. At best this can be untidy, but in the wrong weather, it can come closer to alarming – even with its GKN limited-slip differential as standard.

If you've a long distance to cover, you'll want to be in the Boxster, although the Griffith is by no means for short hauls only. Naturally, the Porsche's cabin quality is from a different planet, and refinement, with its electric roof either up or down, is far beyond what the TVR can achieve. But tall drivers beware: the Boxster cabin is notably short of legroom, and those of 6ft or more should go for an extended test drive to make sure they can not only get but also stay comfortable in the car.

The new TVR customer will find no such problems and will likely be surprised by how well the Griffith copes with the miles. The controls – the unassisted steering and rather obstructive gearbox in particular – are heavy, but, once the road opens up and you change into its tall top gear, the V8, wonderfully and unapologetically raucous when required, quietens to a delightful burble. You will be surprised, too, at how well the rigid central roof panel resists the worst of the wind rush and how easily it is removed and stowed in the boot – once you've acquired the knack of fitting the rigid panel through the just-large-enough opening. It's no Porsche, for sure, but it's several streets better in these regards than something like a Caterham.

If it is peace of mind you're after, the Porsche is the one to have, but bear in mind that the car will not only cost more to buy but also, if something does go wrong, be expensive to fix. It is pretty much a given that things will get shabby and go wrong with the Griffith, but the important bits responsible for getting you from one place to another – engine, gearbox, clutch and so on – are remarkably strong. You're much more likely to find your window winders have packed up: boring, but hardly disastrous compared with a conrod making a bid for freedom.

Besides, there's a strong school of thought which argues that most of the faults carried by TVRs of this era were due to dodgy assembly at the factory and that, once they've gone wrong once and been put right, they're much less likely to fail again. In an older car such as this, everything that was going to fail due to poor standards of construction at the point of source will have done so by now.

When they were new, the original Boxster and Griffith were conceptually separate, with prices that spoke to quite different customers. In 1996 the Porsche would have set you back £33,630, a figure made all the more eye-watering when you consider that a decade later a new Boxster, with six gears, a 2.7-litre engine and years of detail development, cost just £31,630. A 4-litre Griffith, by way of contrast, cost just £28,965, which, even back in 1992, represented astonishing value.

But not, perhaps, as astonishing as the low prices for which you can score a reasonable example today. Even towards the top of the market, the Griffith appears as a conspicuous bargain. What other convertible can you buy for this money that combines such spectacular

PORSCHE BOXSTER 2.5

Sold/number built 1996-2004/c165,000
Construction steel monocoque, aluminium panels
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 2480cc flat-six, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 204bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 177lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts **rear** multiple links, coil spring/damper struts; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes vented discs, with servo and ABS
Length 14ft 2in (4315mm)
Width 6ft 4in (1780mm)
Height 4ft 2⅘in (1290mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 11⅕in (2415mm)
Weight 1252kg
0-60mph 6.5 secs
Top speed 139mph **Mpg** 24
Price new £33,630

THE DEALER*
JONATHAN LEACH

"The problem with Boxsters is they hold their prices so well," says Jonathan Leach from Cridfords of Surrey (01483 273302; cridfords.co.uk). The low-mileage 1996 car featured here is on sale for £18,000, but private sales start at £14k. "Full service history is essential, but don't be put off by high-mileage or multiple-owner cars. If looked after, they still drive really well at 120,000 miles," Jonathan adds. "Three wheel sizes are available: 18in rims look better, but the ride is best on 17s. Hardtops aren't essential as the roof is so good, but expect to pay a premium if it has one.

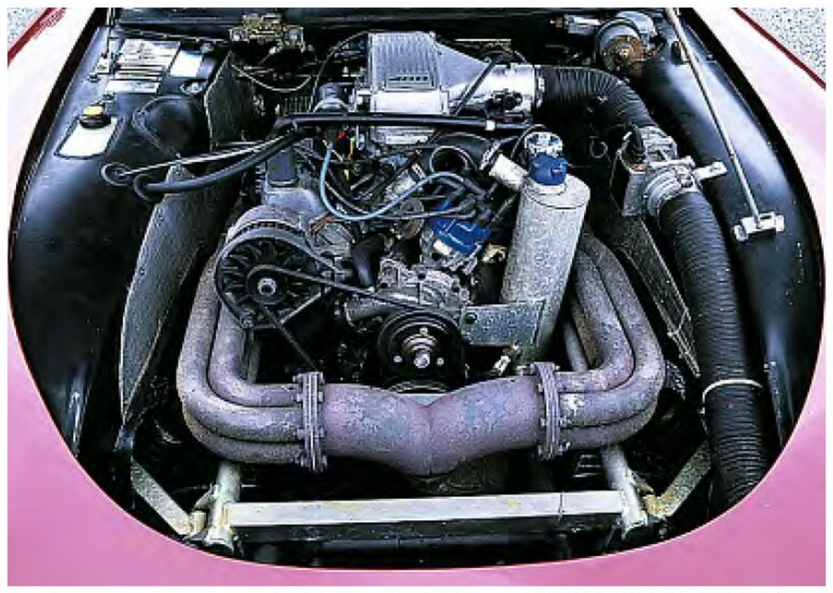
"Don't worry about localised bubbles on the alloy panels of the hood mechanism – paint never takes well here. The interiors and hoods are both very tough. For crash-repair damage, start by checking inside the bonnet for the factory build sticker. All UK-spec models should start with C16 digits. If it's missing, doesn't match the service booklet or is oversprayed, then get into lifting carpets. Inner boot corner panels should be unpainted, and be wary if body-panel nuts have been spannered or the gutter welds have been disturbed. Suspension bushes get squeaky with age – irritating, but not a big problem. Clutches should survive 50,000 miles, but engine oil seals don't last and are best sorted when the clutch is changed.

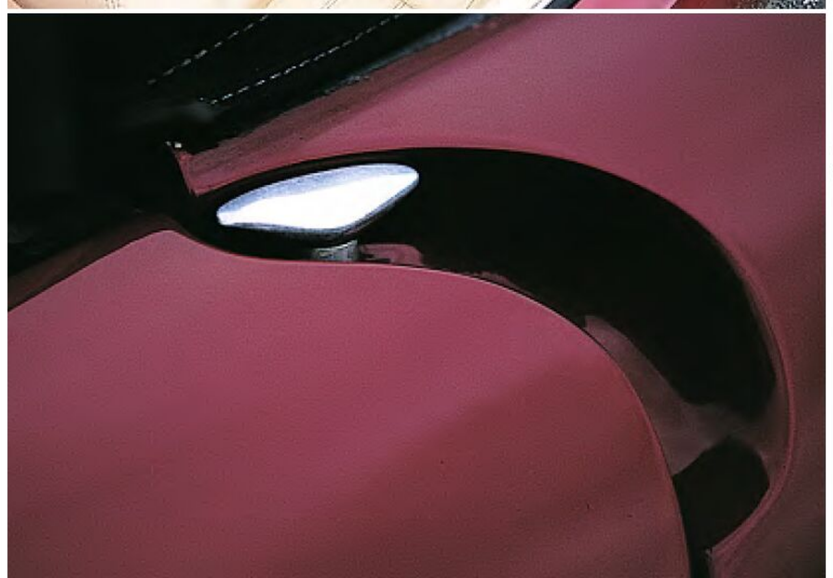
"The S is a lot more expensive, but even on a track day you won't be disappointed with the 2.5. It's a beautifully balanced car that just gets better the harder you drive it. Cars such as the Lotus Elise are a love/hate relationship because it's so focused: that never happens with the Boxster."

*PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

Boxster holds its line beautifully with plenty of grip, wet or dry. The ride is excellent, and its 2.5-litre flat-six spins eagerly. Below: engine is completely hidden, while interior feels well finished

Griffith will do this in the wet with little provocation – the engine is set well back so it's very controllable, but you reach the lock-stops quickly. Below: unique detailing, from door releases and fit to window frames





THE DEALER*
ADRIAN BLYTH

"The lowest price you should pay for a Griffith is around £11,500," says TVR specialist Adrian Blyth (07831 295373; adrianblyth.com), now trading from the old Key Garage site in Grayshott, Surrey. "If you choose carefully, that will buy you a well-used but clean 1992 car."

Adrian insists that, despite TVR's grisly reputation for reliability, a well-maintained Griff is actually pretty dependable. He says: "The engines and gearboxes are strong, and I'm not sure I've ever changed a clutch. The things that do go wrong are annoyances such as electrics and other ancillaries. Starter motors can be problematic on 5-litre cars, and the suspension bushes need doing fairly regularly, but parts are usually pretty cheap."

However, Adrian reckons that there are two things you must watch out for: now that these cars are a decade or more old, chassis are starting to rot, so you must make sure any car you're thinking of is not corroded beneath its gleaming glassfibre body. Second, some early Griffiths leaked, so water damage to carpets and upholstery can be unsightly, smelly and expensive to put right.

He also warns that, because of that plastic body, accident damage is more difficult to spot than it would be on a steel car. One giveaway is that the 4- and 4.3-litre cars have a different nose from that of the later 5-litre cars and these are no longer made. So if you are buying a 4- or 4.3-litre Griffith and its driving lights are inset into the 'mouth' of the bonnet, it's a 5-litre bonnet and a racing certainty that the car's had an argument with something hard at some stage in its life.

*PRICES CORRECT AT TIME OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATION

TVR GRIFFITH 400

Sold/number built 1992-2002/2582
Construction tubular steel backbone chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv, 16v 3946cc V8, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 236bhp @ 5250rpm
Max torque 270lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil-over dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes vented front, solid rear discs, with servo
Length 13ft (3965mm)
Width 6ft 5in (1943mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1185mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2303lb (1045kg)
0-60mph 4.8 secs
Top speed 146mph **Mpg** 19
Price new £28,965 (1992)

looks and shattering performance in such an eminently practical and usable package?

A Boxster, just about. When it was new, the Boxster came surfing into shore on a tidal wave of purple prose written by those for whom the idea of an affordable Porsche, a real-world successor to the 356, was almost too good to be true. And one look at its still-strong residual values shows that history has yet to find a reason to modify this opinion.

But history also shows us that, unlike so many cars, from Jaguar's E-type to Ferrari's 308, the first Boxsters will not be remembered as the best of the breed. Indeed, it was only when the basic engine was expanded to 2.7 litres in 1999 that rather more of the Boxster's potential was realised – and, critically, that fabulous chassis finally got something approaching the power it deserved. Yet it seems likely that the Boxster to which classic status will be most readily ascribed will be the 3.2-litre Boxster S. Introduced at the same time as the 2.7, its near-identical looks belied a transformation under the skin. Not only did it become good for 160mph, but it also had six gears, better brakes, highly evolved suspension and even better handling. It felt like not only a great car but also, more importantly, a proper Porsche.

No one would say the Griffith was anything other than a proper TVR, one of the best in the company's history and quite possibly the most attractive. Although its engine would grow through 4.3 and 4.5 litres (with a rare big-valve 4.3 being briefly available, too) to 5 litres, the original 4-litre cars (actually 3946cc) are by no means poor relations. Partly it's because only the certifiable will find their performance lacking, but it's also because only these very early cars were spared catalytic converters, and they sound even better than the later, quicker, 5-litre cars.

In short, the Boxster is a fine car, but its status as an emerging classic is not yet assured. Yet it's a title that the Griffith holds on to with both hands. It's hardly sophisticated, but when you're going that fast, looking that good, having that much fun and listening to that noise, it's not a difficult thing to forgive.

FRESH-AIR ALTERNATIVES

The rampant success of the Mazda MX-5 meant that, by the mid-1990s, the markets were overflowing once more with fun, affordable convertibles.

If all you're interested in are good looks, a great name and a low price, the GTV-based **Alfa Romeo Spider** is very cheap, with early 1996 cars of average mileage selling for entry-level money. You'll have to put up with scuttle shake, patchy build quality and the knowledge that you will never look as cool as Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, but the Twin Spark engine is strong and, at this stage, they simply can't have much further to fall. Sadly, the more attention-grabbing 3-litre engine did not become available until 2001 and, as a result, they sit right at the top of the Spider market.

Similar money will get you into a 1999 **Audi TT Roadster**, albeit likely one with the lowlier 180bhp engine and a five-speed gearbox. The better and more desirable 225bhp, six-speed version (as above) costs a little more but, both now and when you come to sell, is worth it. Bear in mind that while TTs look great, rarely go wrong and cling tenaciously to their value, they are not great driver's cars. The four-cylinder engines are torquey but aurally dull, while handling from the Golf-derived chassis is pretty stodgy. They are more show than go.

Which is the last accusation you would level about the **BMW M Roadster**. In effect a Z3 with a 321bhp six-cylinder engine attached, these Munich sports cars are rude and quite crude, but if you want German engineering mated to TVR performance, this is by far most effective way of achieving it. M Roadsters are a rare sight, however, and prices are starting to climb as a result.

If it's a British sports car you're after, the best of the era remains the **Lotus Elise**. Contrary to what you might expect from a vehicle bearing a Lotus badge, the Elise has proven to be pretty reliable and, so long as you can verify its history, there is no need to be frightened of taking one on with some miles under its cambelts.

Early examples are now being coveted, particularly unmolested and unmodified cars. The more powerful 111S model followed the 1995 original from '99, while the new shape that appeared for '02 tends to be more affordable. All are great to drive, although the later cars are more forgiving.

BRUISING, BRITISH & BRILLIANT

The UK invented and perfected the hairy-chested sports car, and this trio represents greats from three eras: TVR Chimaera, TR6 and Healey 100

WORDS **SIMON CHARLESWORTH** PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES LIPMAN**

Clockwise: gorgeous shape promises classic British sports-car thrills; elegant tail; high-compression 'four' with triple SUs beneath 100M's louvred bonnet; physical steering via large sprung wheel

Traditionally a gentleman's conveyance, the British sports car underwent a post-war mutation. Inspired by a blend of Clement Attlee's social parity and the 'export or die' search for revenue, affordable sports cars grew in sound and speed, and they gained a hirsute nickname. This breed of 'hairy-chested' sports cars helped to scratch the itch of demob suits on civvy street by injecting an element of enjoyable, dry-mouthed thrills into their owners' routines. Essentially vulgar, these cars combined pace with power that outweighed their chassis' sophistication, and they became a British speciality that endured through the decades until the demise of TVR in 2006.

The origins of the formula can be traced to Sydney Allard, a talented driver and winner of the 1949 British Hillclimb Championship and 1952 Monte-Carlo Rally. He also chalked up a third at Le Mans and was responsible for introducing drag racing to Britain in 1960. But it was his lairy and scary sports cars that cemented his reputation among enthusiasts. The first Allard was built in 1936 for trials, with a Ford Model 48 chassis and a sidevalve V8, but the Allard Motor Company proper wasn't formed until 1946, producing increasingly spectacular roadgoing specials with Ford, Chrysler or Cadillac V8 power.

Taking that basic recipe and adding a touch of civility, not to mention style, was the Austin-Healey 100. Launched at the 1952 Earls Court show, it was a reaction to the changing market in which the Donald Healey Motor Company was competing. Its range of twin-high-cam Riley-powered cars was not long for this world due to Nuffield Group engine rationalisation, and there was the equally troubling matter of the Jaguar XK120, a pin-up model that looked as awe-inspiring as its top speed and low price.

In 1951, Healey started work on a new 100mph car designed, like the Triumph TR, to fit between MG's T-type Midget and the XK120. The initial problem was finding a suitable powertrain, but the answer came from a most unlikely place, thanks to journalist Tommy Wisdom: the Austin Atlantic's 90bhp 2660cc 'four'. Donald and son Geoffrey Healey set up a deal with Austin's Leonard Lord; Geoff Cooper and Barry Bilbie consulted with Healey Jnr on suitable Austin parts for the chassis; then it was clothed in a pretty, Gerry Coker-designed body. The end product made such an impact on Lord that he proposed to Donald that BMC should assemble the new car. It was a wise move, because this verbal agreement secured Healey's future, and production of the BN1 Austin-Healey 100 was transferred from Warwick to Longbridge in 1953.

During its life, the BN1 underwent nearly 60 detail changes before evolving into the BN2 in August 1955. This featured subtle styling changes and a new four-speed gearbox, and it spawned first the 132bhp lightweight 100S then the Warwick-built 100M with 'Le Mans modifications'. These comprised high-compression pistons, a high-lift cam, twin 1¾in H6 SU carbs with cold-air box and special inlet manifolds, a distributor with a modified automatic advance curve and a steel/asbestos/copper cylinder-head gasket. Uprated front dampers and anti-roll bar were fitted, while a louvred bonnet with a leather strap, plus two-tone paint and a black-and-silver dashboard, ensured that the world knew you had something special. Before (and after) the £855 100M was introduced, a number of 'M' kits were also installed in standard 100s.

'These sports cars helped scratch the itch of demob suits on civvy street'

The large, upright wheel of Bob Reid's 1955 100M sits close to your chest, and only the windscreen stands between you and your surroundings. Concentration is demanded by the long-throw three-speed overdrive gearchange because it has a touch of Picasso to it: no gear is quite where it should be. The drums require a shove but are effective, and the ride is firm, particularly from a rear end that calls for vigilance when travelling in haste. But complaining about it is like a fan of The Who moaning about the antics of its drummer. The ride somehow underpins the high-energy tempo of belting across country in a 100M.

The Healey also has a surprising nimbleness to it through twists and turns, and a far greater *joie de vivre* than its 100/6 successor, which feels as if it is forever fighting the flabby disinterest of its lethargic C-series 'six'. The 4750rpm redline appears low, but the torque of the big 'four' – peaking at just 2000rpm – is as relentless as a lava flow, and because of those large SU carbs the throttle response is instant, almost startling. In here there is no fat on the bone, no meaningless soft-soap to dull your dialogue

with the 100. Just a sharp, clear shot of what a sports car should be all about, accompanied by the enjoyable burble of the exhaust's baritone.

More fluid and precise than the sidescreen TRs, the 100 is a superb piece of design. Outside and in, its pure beauty is allied to a subtle muscular presence without resorting to any bumps, lumps, grilles or blisters. A big grin betrays my thoughts – no wonder the Big Healey appeal lasted for 15 years.

Unfortunately, by the time the TR6 was introduced in 1969, let alone its demise seven years later, such characteristics were regarded as a touch primitive. Sports-car customers were becoming spoilt by more sophisticated machines such as the Alfa Romeo Duetto, which managed to combine genuine comfort with enjoyable handling.

Exciting as Triumph's 1965 monocoque 'Fury' prototype was, this contemporary of the TR4A wasn't thrilling enough to lure management's gaze away from the bottom line. Just as Leyland would do many times in the ensuing decade, it took the 'make-do and mend' approach and fitted the 150bhp 'six' into the TR4A to create the short-lived 1967 TR5. Given the pace of '60s car design, however, the TR5's replacement would need a new look to compete against the likes of the MGC. Triumph's favoured designer, Giovanni Michelotti, was busy with other projects, so the commission went to Karmann in West Germany. The new car had to retain the running gear, scuttle, doors and inner structure of the TR5, but look completely fresh – oh, and Karmann had to produce the tooling, too. All in a scarcely believable 14 months.

The heavy-set TR6 might have the brutal aesthetic sophistication of civic art, with bold staring headlights like a Chihuahua's eyes, but somehow it works. I couldn't tell you how or why, it just does. It had staying power, too. The TR6 scarcely changed during production, save two mechanical differences: Stag ratios replaced TR5 cogs in 1971, and a year later the 125bhp CR 'six' replaced the 150bhp CP.

This engine must be one of Triumph's finest engineering achievements. As the tachometer needle stretches for the 5000rpm redline, a rich harmony shimmies forth from its exhausts. It's not as raucous as the TVR, but it is just as addictive, more refined and more cultured.

Again belonging to Bob Reid, and rumoured to be a former *Autocar* road-test car, this TR6 has a simply appointed cabin with an excellent sense of space. Add in the low waistline and you can really connect with your blustery surroundings. That said, some things could be better. The feedback from the driver's seat – the ride, the throttle response, the whiff of front-end damper float – is less satisfying than in the 100M. The brakes could be more conscientious and the gearbox can feel mushy across the gate. It's superior to an MGC – like all of these cars, it will gleefully wag its tail if you corner with excessive ambition – but it isn't the sharpest tool in the sports-car box.

Clockwise: twin tailpipes emit a gorgeous straight-six snarl; lightly modified interior with retrim and walnut dash; Lucas mechanical fuel injection helps lusty 'six' to its headline 150bhp

Clockwise: the hairy-chested sports car reinvented for the 1990s; subtle wheels for early car; Rover V8 was stretched to 3950cc and 240bhp for Chimaera; swoopy dash was a foretaste of TVRs to come

Does any of this matter? Nope. Accelerate hard and the TR6 still feels quick. Through a sweeping complex of corners, feeding the slim three-spoke wheel – connected to light, positive steering – and flicking in and out of overdrive, there isn't anywhere else you'd rather be. Even on damp roads, hurtling along with your nervous system hard-wired to this car and being wooed by its song, it is a pure joy.

Finally, it's time for the TVR. As time ticks by it is looking increasingly as if the Peter Wheeler years, from 1981 to 2004, were the company's heyday. A period when TVR moved to big, muscular V8-powered pin-ups as a matter of course, providing a much-needed distraction from the banality of contemporary tin-tops.

The glorious 1992 Griffith filled the gap left by the 420SEAC and, in typical Wheeler fashion, it was a mighty machine, sharing its chassis with the Tuscan racer. To complement the Griffith and broaden TVR's appeal, the Chimaera was slightly softer, with a larger boot for touring. It was styled by John Ravenscroft and Peter Wheeler, with front detailing by his dog, Ned (who took a considered bite out of the buck to create the front indicator apertures).

During its nine-year run, the Chimaera's styling evolved with tweaks to the lights, interior and nose. It was originally to give a debut to TVR's own AJP8 engine, but that would eventually take its bow in the 1996 2+2 Cerbera, and instead the Chimaera stuck to the Rover V8, which gradually grew from 4 to 5 litres. Others attempted to compete with TVR's blend of performance, style and rumbling exhausts, but few lasted the distance. Jensen and Ginetta tried, as did MG with the RV8, but only the Morgan Plus 8 outlasted the Chimaera.

'A heavy, long-travel throttle pedal is TVR's budget alternative to traction control'

Both the Griffith and its twin were replaced by the short-lived Tamora in 2002, but TVR nursed a reputation for indifferent quality during the noughties, and BMW, Mercedes and Porsche were increasingly trying to muscle in on the Blackpool firm's turf.

Clamber aboard Graham Paris' Chimaera and you feel as if you're plugging yourself in. Swathes of leather encircle you and the driving position scores highly for its comfort and ergonomics. These New Forest roads boast every kind of challenging surface – heavy cambers, flowing undulations, high-frequency wrinkles – yet the TVR's chassis remains calm. The brakes are powerful, too – as effective as hitting a brick wall, but a rather more pleasant sensation. The precise Borg-Warner T5 manual gearbox, fitted post-1994, is nicely weighted and deliciously mechanical. The only control that requires acclimatisation is the heavy, long-travel throttle, TVR's budget alternative to traction control.

Corners are easy meat. The Chimaera has a level of ride sophistication at odds with the TVR stereotype and superior to any of its British rivals, yet when the Tarmac turns spicy there's maniacal grip, feedback and composure.

Dive on to the brakes, drop down through the 'box and into an S-bend; the superbly geared manual steering is just-so. Squeeze the throttle. The tacho needle passes 4000rpm and there's another eruption of aural virtuosity. What acceleration – sub-5 secs from 0-60mph – and what a noise, as eight warbling pistons enjoy a fevered orchestrated workout.

Given the marque's uncertain future, the most popular TVR of all is a bona fide classic car. Sadly, the hairy-chested Brit is now an endangered species. Just as chaps have been encouraged to epilate, it has been emasculated, shaven, waxed and preened by ever more demanding emissions and safety legislation, and pampered customer expectations.

Cold advances as blood vacates bodily extremities: fingertips and nose are long-lost territories. But I must go for one more drive. These cars feel like different generations of the same family. All rumble, crackle and pop on the overrun – almost remonstrating with right-foot hesitation. All have big, simple hearts, make you smile and banish insipid waiting-room silence in favour of a front-row seat at a Rolling Stones concert. So picking a favourite is a tough task.

My fondness for early Healeys and Wheeler TVRs has grown, but I was expecting that. What I wasn't anticipating was to fall head over heels for an outdated car with looks that only a mother could love. The TR6 isn't as raw or as sharp as the Healey, nor is it as loud or as dynamically accomplished as the TVR, but this oft-overlooked TR is a beguiling blend of both. It's enough to put hairs on your chest.

Thanks to *Austin-Healey Club – New Forest Centre (nfahc.co.uk); TVR Car Club (tvr-car-club.co.uk); Southern Triumph Services (southerntriumph.co.uk)*

TVR CHIMAERA 4.0

Sold/no built 1992-2003/c6000
Construction steel spaceframe chassis, glassfibre body **Engine** all-alloy, ohv 3950cc V8, fuel injection **Max power** 240bhp @ 5250rpm **Max torque** 270lb ft @ 4000rpm **Transmission** five-speed manual, RWD **Suspension** independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented front, solid rear discs, servo **Length** 13ft 2in (4015mm) **Width** 6ft 1in (1865mm) **Height** 4ft (1215mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 6in (2286mm) **Weight** 2237lb (1060kg) **0-60mph** 4.7 secs **Top speed** 152mph **Mpg** 22 **Price new** £26,250

Or you could have...
MORGAN PLUS 8
Sold/no built 1964-2004/6233 **0-60mph** 6.7 secs
Top speed 124mph **Price new** £1478
Plus 4 chassis meets Rover 3.5-litre V8 power to make a fast, handsome and feisty sports car.

TRIUMPH TR6

Sold/no built 1968-'76/91,850
Construction steel ladder chassis, steel body **Engine** all-iron, ohv 2498cc 'six', mechanical fuel injection **Max power** 150bhp @ 5500rpm **Max torque** 164lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission** four-speed manual, optional overdrive, RWD **Suspension** independent, at **front** by wishbones, telescopics, a/r bar **rear** semi-trailing arms, lever-arm dampers; coils f/r **Steering** rack and pinion **Brakes** discs f, drums r, servo **Length** 12ft 11in (3940mm) **Width** 5ft 1in (1550mm) **Height** 4ft 2in (1270mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 4in (2240mm) **Weight** 2473lb (1122kg) **0-60mph** 8.2 secs **Top speed** 119mph **Mpg** 23 **Price new** £1333 19s 1d

Or you could have...
SUNBEAM TIGER
Sold/no built 1964-'67/7085
0-60mph 9.4 secs
Top speed 116mph **Price new** £1146
The other British sports car to get Shelby's Ford V8 transplant. Far cheaper than a Cobra, too.

AUSTIN-HEALEY 100M

Sold/no built 1955-'56/3924 (factory cars)
Construction steel ladder chassis, steel body **Engine** all-iron, ohv 2660cc 'four', twin SU H6 carburettors **Max power** 110bhp @ 4500rpm **Max torque** 144lb ft @ 2000rpm **Transmission** three-speed manual, overdrive, RWD **Suspension: front** independent, by wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, leaf springs; lever-arms f/r **Steering** worm and roller **Brakes** drums **Length** 12ft 7in (3835mm) **Width** 5ft ½in (1537mm) **Height** 4ft 1in (1245mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 6in (2286mm) **Weight** 2170lb (984kg) **0-60mph** 9.6 secs **Top speed** 109mph **Mpg** 22 **Price new** £1063 12s 6d (Healey 100)

Or you could have...
TRIUMPH TR2/TR3/TR3A
Sold/no built 1953-'62/83,572
0-60mph 11.9 secs
Top speed 103mph **Price new** £787
Not as precise as an MGA, nor as pretty, but sidescreen TRs are tough and big fun to drive.

Riding the TVR rollercoaster

As TVR marked its 70th birthday, the green shoots of revival were once again emerging. *C&SC* joined enthusiasts on an emotional tour from a storied past to a possible bright future

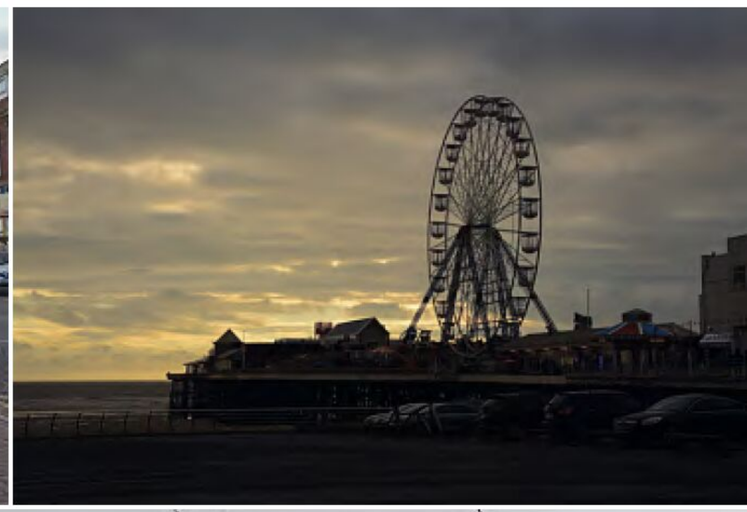
WORDS **GREG MACLEMAN** PHOTOGRAPHY **NEIL WILLIAMS**

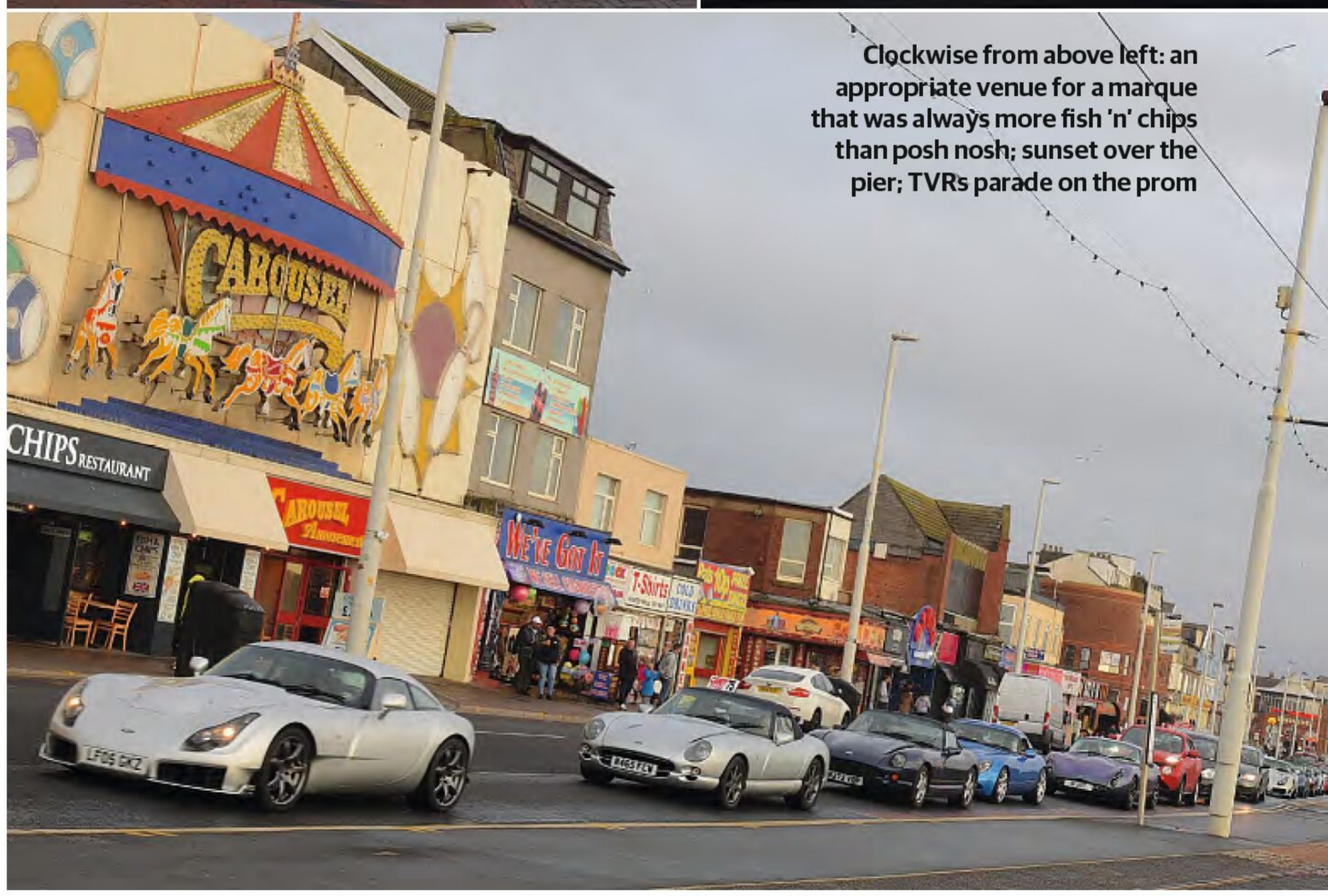
Cruising along the sprawling Blackpool promenade at dusk, with the reflections of a thousand lights from the seafront amusement arcades and sweet-shop signs dancing across the drizzle-spattered windscreen, this bleak northern town seems an unlikely home for one of Britain's most loved low-production car manufacturers. But for now, the firm so inextricably bound to the seaside resort has found a new base in Wales following its most recent revival effort, the electric shock to the chest coming courtesy of video-games developer and entrepreneur Les Edgar, along with a dozen associates. So, on an overcast and blustery day, about 50 TVRs have returned to Blackpool for one last hurrah before thundering down to inaugurate the new factory site in Ebbw Vale, Gwent.

Former archivist and now club chairman Richard Sails tickles the throttle of his Griffith – an early 4-litre 'pre-cat' model later fitted with a 4.5-litre Big Valve engine – and pulls away from the lights. "I've only had the car for a couple of days," he says, "but I'd been trying to buy it for 15 years. We agreed a price a couple of years ago, and now I've finally got it." Another stab of the accelerator sends a deep bellow reverberating across the rain-soaked streets.

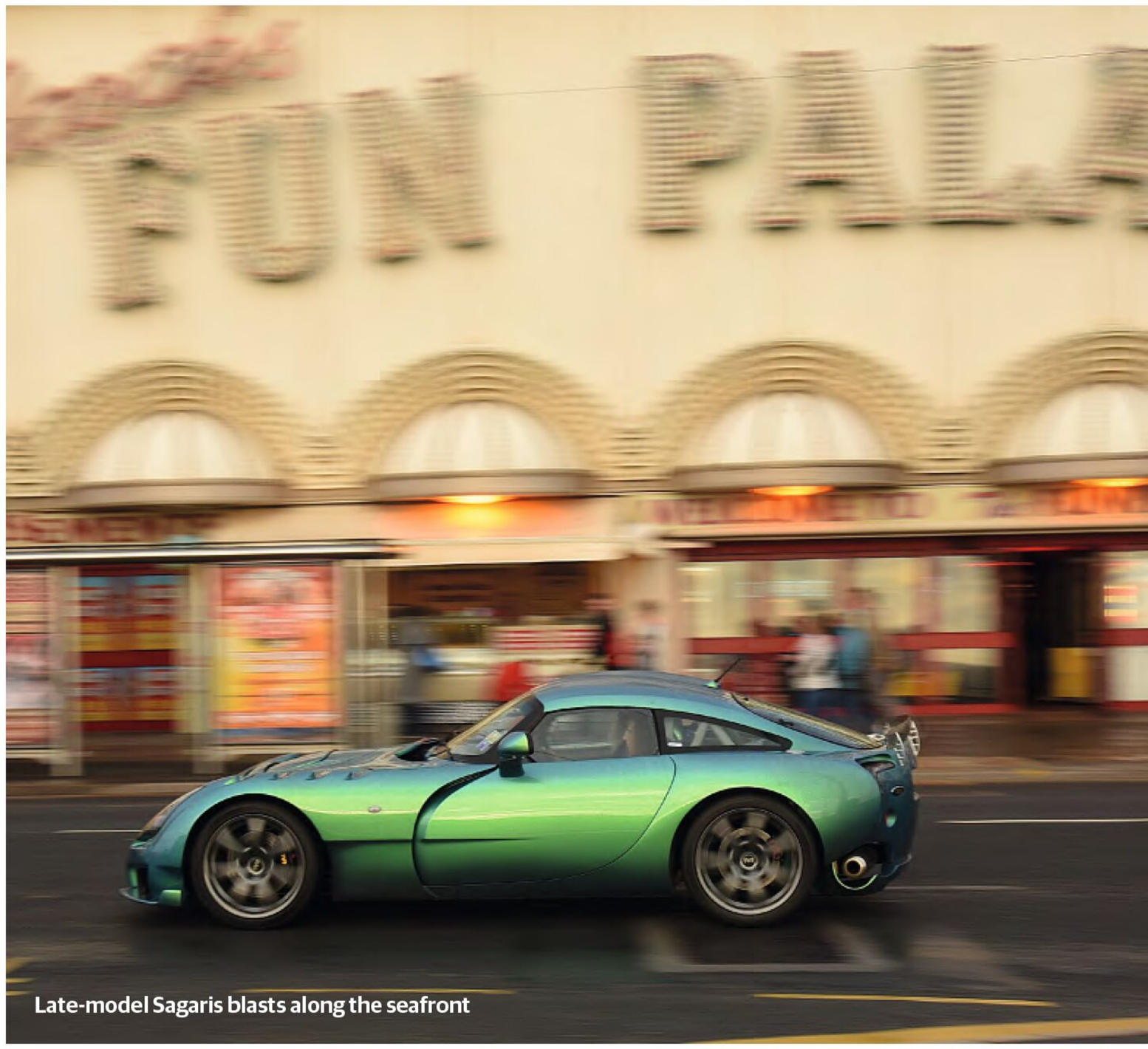
We set off from Blackpool's south shore, heading a convoy of TVRs spanning 50 years of production, although the most commercially successful – and loudest – models are best represented. Holidaymakers braving the windswept promenade point and smile as the baritone V8 rumble of Chimaeras, Cerberas and Griffiths echoes around the Central and North Piers, which, despite the grizzly weather, are teeming with life. As dusk gives way to night we arrive at the Top Chippy on the north shore; the surrounding roads quickly become overrun by glassfibre sports cars, every spare parking bay and expanse of pavement packed with TVRs and their enthusiastic owners. The fish-and-chip run isn't glamorous, but it's a fitting start to the 'Back Home > New Home' tour, masterminded by the TVR Car Club as a way to mark 70 years of the marque and say goodbye to the old stomping ground that had been home to the firm since the early post-war years.

Much like Blackpool, whose fortunes have ebbed and flowed at the whim of an uncertain economy and changing consumer habits, TVR's history is a patchwork of highs and lows, but it is ultimately a truly British tale of survival. The story began with a certain Trevor Wilkinson's first Alvis-based two-seater special in 1947, and within 10 years TVR Engineering had taken up residence on Blackpool's Hoo Hill industrial estate. Despite quickly graduating from producing a handful of kit cars and Specials to more than 100 Mk1 Granturas, however, the company struggled financially, and by 1958 the firm had been dissolved, replaced by Layton Sports Cars. The cashflow and quality problems continued until the outfit was saved by TVR dealers Bryan Hopton and Keith Aitchison, and it was renamed TVR Cars Ltd in 1961. Trevor Wilkinson – the founder of the company and for whom it was named – was then sidelined by his fellow directors and eventually resigned.





Clockwise from above left: an appropriate venue for a marque that was always more fish 'n' chips than posh nosh; sunset over the pier; TVRs parade on the prom



Late-model Sagaris blasts along the seafront

'A stab of the accelerator sends a deep V8 bellow reverberating across the rain-soaked streets'

Though firmer than a Chimaera, the Griffith still blends searing pace with surprising civility

1962 TVR GRANTURA

One of the oldest cars at RAF Cosford was club stalwart **Ian Massey-Crosse**'s Mk3 Grantura, which is a fascinating link to the firm's early history. "The improved chassis and suspension of the Mk3 work really well," he says. "It's lovely to drive. Later cars also have a 4½in-longer door, which makes all the difference when you're getting out!"

An article by marque historian Peter Filby first convinced Ian to buy the TVR, he says: "It ticked all the boxes. It had a tubular steel chassis, rust-free glassfibre body, front disc brakes and independent suspension. I got it in 1976 and repainted it in '78. I chose white because I thought it would look slab-sided in a darker colour, although it was at various points orangey red, dark red and even gold."

1978 TVR 3000S

As the group gathers at X Works Service, one car draws more attention than most: **Alan Preston**'s stunning 3000S. "I've had it for five and half years," he says. "The previous owner rebuilt some of the car, and I finished it off. It was road-legal but smoked badly, and the gearbox and rear axle were in a bad way. I ripped it all out and started over again."

Incredibly, the smart paint is now 20 years old, but beneath the glassfibre Alan has been busy. He says: "It's bored out to 3.1 litres, with a hotter cam and the heads ported and polished. I did all of the work myself, and it is also fitted with a four-speed 'box and a single carburettor, which make it very drivable. As long as you're mechanically minded and can do a bit of work, you'll be fine with a TVR."

1978 TVR 3000M

Serial car collectors **Jeff & Carol Sargeant** have a long association with their M-series. "I ordered the car in 1978 and went to see it being made," explains Jeff. "I got it in a slightly different spec – I think it was the first one to have a white vinyl roof.

"My wife and I married in 1979, and the TVR was suitably dressed-up afterwards with toilet rolls and shaving cream. I've done about 170,000 miles since and recently had it fully rebuilt."

The TVR is one of five in his double-figure car collection, which includes two wedges, an S3 and a Chimaera. Jeff adds: "A good friend of my father advised me when I was about six years old that if I kept all the cars I would ever own they would be worth a fortune, and I've been fortunate enough not to have to sell any."

Dawn patrol: owners gather on the south shore for the start of the Saturday tour from Blackpool to RAF Museum Midlands in Cosford, Shropshire

Although there were certainly signs of life in the shape of the much-improved Mk3 Grantura – which threw out the earlier car's chassis and torsion-bar suspension in favour of independent front and rear wishbones – and even an outing at Le Mans in 1962, the concern folded the same year, buckling partly due to the Mk3's late arrival. Incredibly, a creditor of TVR – Grantura Engineering – began turning out cars within a few months, and a second company, Grantura Plastics, was founded to handle the bodyshells. By April 1964, the brutally quick Ford 289cu in V8-powered Griffith 200 had arrived and, despite a growing reputation for poor build quality, it proved to be a huge hit in the United States.

The skies once again darkened for TVR in '65 as American dock strikes hampered Griffith exports, placing the firm under financial strain at a time when it was developing a brand-new model: it was hoped the futuristic, wedge-shaped Trident would transform the image of the company from its kit-car roots to a bona fide sports-car manufacturer. The stunning machine broke cover in Geneva that year, but it failed to impress in the US. The crisis deepened when Grantura Engineering MD Arnold Burton lost patience with the company haemorrhaging money, and turned off the tap. The doors were closed at Hoo Hill, and Grantura Engineering was liquidated in September 1965.

Mere weeks passed before TVR dealers once again rescued the firm, this time Martin Lilley and his father, Arthur, who bought the company and renamed it TVR Engineering, returning the B-series-engined Grantura 1800S to production in 1966 and launching the Tuscan V8 and Vixen the following year. The Lilleys pressed through a difficult period and led the move to a larger new facility at Bristol Avenue, Blackpool, and several new models followed.

As dawn breaks the following morning, the phalanx of TVRs once again gathers on the resort town's south shore, the rain of the previous evening having been blown away by a stiff sea breeze. More cars arrive before the cavalcade heads into the town, rumbling past the Tower then striking out into the suburbs, bound for an unassuming road of Victorian terraced houses that once marked the location of the company's first workshop. Long-since forgotten, the Beverley Road site elicits just the odd sideways glance from drivers and a few quizzical looks from residents, no doubt wondering why their quiet morning has been punctuated by the din of gathering V8s.

It's a similar story at the firm's second home on the Hoo Hill industrial estate, and Bristol

'The sharp bark of a Tuscan S exhaust has the owners scurrying back to their cars'

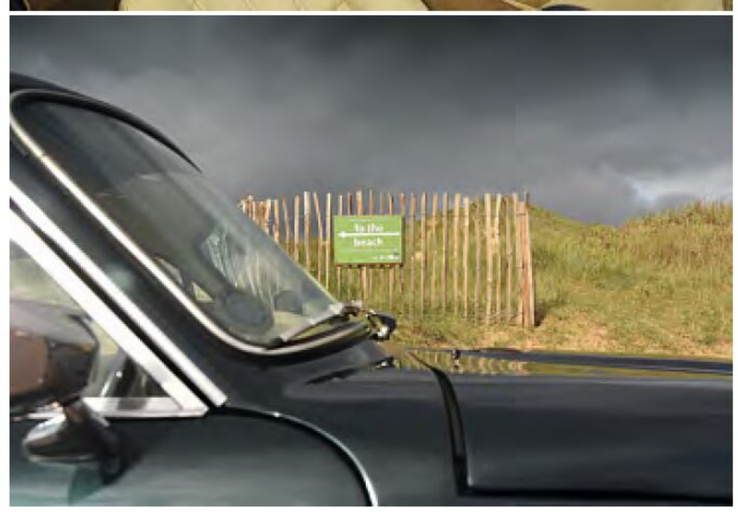
1984 TVR TASMIN

Sharp-eyed readers might just recognise **Jez Barker**'s Tasmin, because it was once owned by *C&SC* editor Alastair Clements. "I was after a V8S, but that was out of my price range," says Jez. "Then I saw this, which I had seen in the magazine. After a quick drive I was sold.

"The battery failed on the way home, but we got it started and managed to get back. Since then, the engine has been rebuilt and it has had new brakes and a bit of rewiring. The chassis outriggers were replaced and the car has been repainted in a Volkswagen Scirocco green."

So what drew Jez to TVRs in the first place? "It has to be the noise," he says. "After that, they're easy to work on, quick if you want them to be and reasonably reliable. And the bodies don't rust."

X Works Service lives in a former factory building



From top: Griff's doorhandles are sited inboard, on the transmission tunnel; brooding sky over Taimar

1988 TVR S

Locals **Sue Carlin** and Alan Baguley drove to RAF Cosford from near Telford, meeting a number of crews at Whitchurch before following them to the Museum. Sue's very original S has been in the family for four years. "My husband saw me in a wedge," she says, "but I didn't really like them and eventually bought this car at Brightwells. It was first sold to a young David Abdoo of Thames Television."

She adds: "It came with a fresh MoT, but there were lots of issues. We sorted the suspension and the fuel system – the engine now gives better performance than when Ford sold it to TVR. This winter we're in for a new fuel tank, and the seats need replacing. We won't take it off the road to do it all at once because it's too costly – and I enjoy driving it too much!"

Avenue, where the main factory building now houses a gymnasium named 'Bispham Body Senze'. The only remnant of the building's motoring heritage – aside from its instantly recognisable tall windows and imposing frontage – is a small sticker sitting below where the large TVR sign was once attached. The move to Bristol Avenue took place in late 1970, marking the beginning of another turbulent period for TVR. The Tuscan V6 and Vixens were built here before the arrival of the M-series in 1971, but in 1975 it faced another setback when a near-catastrophic fire, compounded by subsequent efforts to clean up the damage, destroyed several cars and valuable pieces of equipment.

The Lilleys managed to navigate the infamously choppy waters of the 1970s, but by the end of the decade escalating financial difficulties once again loomed over the operation. Cashflow problems were amplified by a number of M-series cars being seized by the US government for infringing emissions regulations, while the all-new Tasmin wedge, which was unveiled in 1980, was a lame – and expensive – duck that failed to sell in the required numbers. The British recession was the final nail in the coffin, leading Martin Lilley to transfer control of the ailing firm to wealthy TVR enthusiast Peter Wheeler in 1981.

Under the charismatic Wheeler's direction sales grew, with the success of the M-inspired S-series – not to mention a line of ever-loopier Rover V8-powered wedges – providing the platform from which to launch the marque's most commercially successful models in the 1990s, beginning with the curvy Griffith and Chimaera. The factory had never been busier. Those days are now a distant memory, but parts of the sprawling Bristol Avenue site are still home to ex-TVR employees in the form, most notably, of Surface & Design. As the road outside the factory fills up with sports cars in a scene reminiscent of the firm's zenith in the 1990s, there's a chance to catch up with S&D director Chris McGuire.

"By 1994 we were building 39 cars a week," he recalls. "That's when the Chimaeras and the Griffs came out, and the orders went sky-high. There were 700 people working here at that point, and it was so busy. We had a separate line for the Cerbera and were doing about three or four of those per week. But the new Tuscans were then slow in coming through, and a lot of people were made redundant.

"Sadly, the firm was bought by someone who didn't want to continue building the cars for some reason, and it all went south. We started up on our own in 2008, and today we're busier than ever. The bodyshop was out the back, but it has all been knocked down now, while the building that we're in today was used for model development."

Previous visitors to the site will no doubt have been transfixed by the part-finished bodyshells and bucks strewn around at the back of the works, but time marches on and they have since been removed. There's a sense that the schism brought about by the collapse of the company is becoming a more distant memory as former factory workers continue the journey on their own.

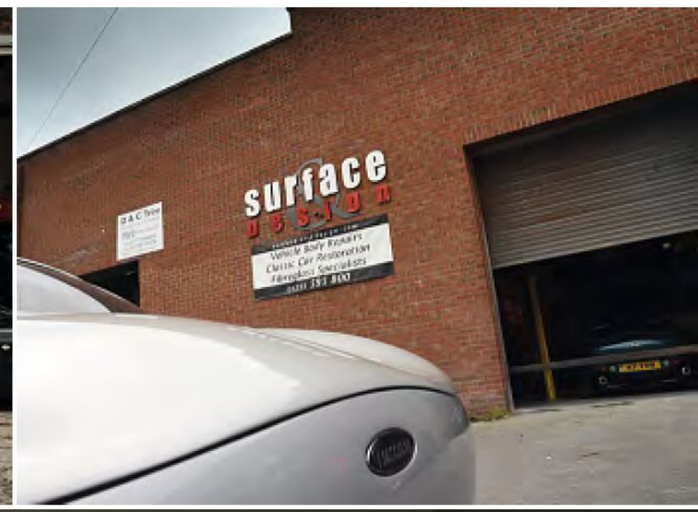
The sharp bark of a Tuscan S exhaust interrupts our conversation and sends owners hurrying back to their cars as once again the convoy of TVRs takes to the road, leaving yet another of the company's famous landmarks in the rear-view mirror. The sprint towards the village of Weeton takes the group past Victoria Hospital and Blackpool Zoo, where the last of

the speed cameras stunting our progress can be left behind. Eventually the first cars enter Kirkham, pulling into the entrance of another former TVR building, now better known for its current occupant, X Works Service, which has become the go-to TVR specialist in the north of England. It's not as well known as the firm's larger sites, but the 'TVR Barn' nonetheless played a key role in the firm's recent history, being the last premises in which the cars were built, latterly late-model Sagaris projects.

X Works owners Heath Briggs and Paul Forrest are well known to the TVR fraternity from their days working in the factory service department, but they ended up going it alone after production ended in 2006. "Paul and I were doing clutches and the odd service on our driveways before we found a garage," says Heath. "I joined up with another guy before asking Paul to come and join me, we were that busy. TVR was still hounding us, saying, 'Will you work for us, will you work for us?'

"I relented, we moved into an old workshop and agreed to split the rent. We finished off their cars here, including Tuscan and Sagaris models. Then a car pulled up one day and the chap said 'you're all sacked'. The landlord was happy for us to take over the lease, and we have now been here for eight years. Nikolai [Smolenski, the Russian banker who bought the firm from Wheeler in 2004] was good to us in the end and said we could keep this and that, including the TVR sign, which we had bought after the dealership in Preston went under."

The pair's services are clearly in high demand, and as Paul crosses the road to tend to a stricken S-series while Heath sees to



Clockwise from top left: mid-run fettling for a Tuscan and Chimaera; Surface & Design lives in the Bristol Ave works; Chris McGuire shares TVR memories

1996 TVR CHIMAERA

Loud colours became a TVR trademark in the 1990s, and **Alan Musgrave**'s highly original and very bright Chimaera is no exception. "I've now owned the car for 16 years, and it hasn't needed anything beyond regular servicing," says Alan. "You hear horror stories – and some that came out of the factory were not great – but most have now been sorted.

"They're entertaining to drive quickly, but you can trundle along at 40mph. I see the Chimaera as a GT car – we've taken it to Le Mans and the Spa-Classic. You can cover 3-400 miles in a day without feeling as if you've been bounced around."

Fully bitten by the TVR bug, Alan now plans to add an 11,000-mile Tuscan to his fleet. He smiles: "I will use that and my wife can have the Chimaera!"

2000 TVR TUSCAN

When he's not working on customers' TVRs, **Heath Briggs** is fettling his own fleet – the Tuscan and a 1996 Chimaera that served as the factory demonstrator. "I used to take people out in it at the factory and always wondered who the hell specified it in gold and brown," Heath says. "They called it The Twix!"

The low-mileage Tuscan is kept for best. "It was standing outside a house for 10 years and I must have spent £10k on parts – never mind the labour," he adds. "The first owner ordered it in Aston Martin BRG after Aston stopped making the car he wanted. I believe he took it out one winter and slid it into a bin wagon. It must have shaken him up, so he parked it on the drive and never came back. It had only 3600 miles on the clock when I got it."

2005 TVR SAGARIS

For outright performance, it's hard to look beyond TVR's most recent model, as Sagaris owner **Nick Bell** explains: "You sit in it and the hairs on the back of your neck prick up. That is how a sports car should make you feel.

"I started thinking about TVRs when the Griffith came out, but it wasn't until I was made redundant that I was able to buy a sports car. I looked at a 911 and a 308, but the Porsche was too efficient and the Ferrari too expensive. I was going to get a Tuscan because it has a boot, but my wife said I should buy the car I really wanted.

"The Sagaris is easy enough to drive, but it has taken me a while to get used to the power: you open the throttle and you need to know how it's going to react to bumps and bends."

Pressing on in a Griffith demands care: it's supple, but the rear wheels are keen to break traction. Below: rally marks 70 years; all eras at RAF Cosford

'It's at pace that a Griffith truly comes into its own, the V8 delivering instant power with some ferocity'

another wounded TVR, we take the opportunity to set off on the next leg of the journey to the RAF Museum at Cosford and give Richard's Griffith a proper leg-stretch. Considering a list of modifications that increase power by about 50%, it remains remarkably compliant at low speeds, and the clutch is lighter than you anticipate. But it's at pace that a Griffith truly comes into its own, and the twisting, undulating country lanes of rural Lancashire provide the perfect opportunity to loosen the reins. The naturally aspirated Rover V8 delivers power instantly and with some ferocity, while the exhaust, rather than climbing to a crescendo, emits a relentless aural barrage broken only by the sharp rise in revs as the rear wheels break traction on these bumpy back-roads. It's a surprisingly comfortable tourer, too, and once we've had our fun we head for the motorway and turn south. The relatively unstressed engine sounds sweet at cruising speeds, wind noise being the only blot in its grand touring copybook – that and a thirst to rival George Best.

At Cosford, participants get another chance to socialise with fellow owners and inspect one another's cars, and by now dozens more TVRs have joined the tour, including a number of older models. In many ways, the cars on display reflect the changing fortunes of the marque, with a lone Grantura sandwiched among the Chimaeras, Griffiths and Tuscans from the firm's most prolific period. It also speaks of the passion that owners have for TVR, and it becomes clear that the enthusiasm and faith in the vehicles that led to so many owners and dealers rescuing the marque throughout the years remains very much alive in the membership of the TVR Car Club.

From Cosford, dozens of TVRs set off to visit the site of the proposed new factory at Ebbw Vale, where a gala dinner awaits, along with a track outing at Llandow Circuit and perhaps even a glimpse of the new concept car ahead of its debut. The Gordon Murray/Cosworth collaboration has members optimistic – albeit cautiously so. But it is here that we part company from the group, swapping the Griff's intoxicating V8 burble for our soulless Korean camera car, and head back to London.

Whether the firm's rebirth turns out to be a true phoenix from the ashes or yet another disinterred corpse remains to be seen. One thing is for sure, though: TVR's future is already assured by the thousands of TVRCC members keeping the spirit of the marque alive, plus the thousands more who will hear that roar and know they simply must have a TVR.

POWER *to the* PEOPLE

The early 1990s was a golden era for British V8 sports cars. TVR, Marcos and MG all took the Rover-powered route and represent great value today

WORDS **CHARLIE CALDERWOOD**
PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW**

The Rover V8 was a bit of a late bloomer. With a history stretching as far back as 1958 at General Motors, it seems strange that an engine so light and compact – and perfect for a sports car – struggled to find its place for so long. Neither the MGB GT V8 nor the Triumph TR8 had much success, but the 20th century's final decade brought with it a crop of eight-cylinder bruisers that finally did the engine justice.

No small part of that delay was down to some traditional managerial oversight at British Leyland. The surprise success of the Range Rover left little spare capacity for selling Rover V8s to third parties in the 1970s, but by the mid-'80s that was changing: the TR8 had been discontinued and sales of the Rover SD1 were flagging. By 1986, the SD1 went off sale and the newly formed Rover Group began lining up a range of transverse front-drive, Honda-derived cars unlikely to need V8 power. Bizarrely, Land Rover was the only division then making use of this lightweight, all-aluminium V8.

All three of the cars here today first appeared in 1992, but TVR and Marcos deserve some extra credit for pioneering the purchase of 'crate' V8s from Longbridge. The 1983 Tasmin 350i (renamed simply 350i a year later) was the Blackpool firm's first model with Rover power, and TVR pulled off the same trick with the V8S a few years later. Yet both of these cars were old designs adapted to receive V8 motors.

The Griffith's public story goes back to its headline-grabbing appearance at the 1990 Birmingham motor show, where 350 were ordered in just a few days. The deposit money was needed, because the show car's V8S chassis required redevelopment to cope with the planned output. The Griffith was to be TVR's first car designed with a V8 from the outset and the first all-new car of the Peter Wheeler era.

The Tuscan racer formed the basis of the new chassis, complete with double-wishbone rear suspension to replace the old trailing-arm set-up that had reached the limit of its potential. A tubular backbone chassis was familiar, though stronger and stiffer than ever, while the floorpan, bulkheads and bodywork were moulded-in at the same time rather than as separate pieces, for further rigidity. Unlike many of the British sports car manufacturers it inspired, TVR modified the V8s it bought from Rover before fitting them to its cars. Coventry-based TVR Power was conveniently located to up the output of the 3.9-litre units to 236bhp before they were sent north to Lancashire.

With smaller volumes envisaged, Marcos couldn't match TVR on that front: its V8s were as supplied, with 187bhp. Marcos had to concentrate elsewhere, with the Mantara being its first type-approved model rather than a 'component car', as the firm had previously described its kits. Like TVR, though, it had been an early customer for Rover V8s: the preceding Mantula used the carb-fed 3.5-litre. It would now make use of the new 3.9-litre unit.

From top: Griffith was also available as a 4.3-litre from launch; Mantara continued the Marcos association with Rover V8s; MG's extra mass blunts its 187bhp output

The Mantula was quite old underneath, however, and Marcos mirrored TVR with the realisation that this latest, fuel-injected Rover V8 required an improved chassis. Increasingly obsolete Triumph-based suspension was swapped for Ford Sierra-derived MacPherson struts up front and a fully independent rear. That in turn required a widening of the front track and bodywork that gave the Mantara its distinctive bulging wheelarches. The body otherwise broadly resembled every previous Marcos since the 1963 GT. And yet this shape was just as old as the one car of this trio from a high-volume manufacturer: MG's RV8.

Market presence is a big deal for automotive execs: it's better for a brand to have a product, even if it isn't selling very well, than to have nothing at all – as long as there is something better down the line to justify the fallow years. In this case that better product was the MGF, so something was needed to bridge the gap between the MG Maestro's discontinuation in 1992 and the arrival of the new sports car in '95. Far preferable, given the marque's change in direction, that it be an open sports car rather than another badge-engineered, front-wheel-drive hatchback. British Motor Heritage's new reissued MGB bodyshells, just returned to low-volume production for the restoration market, provided a timely opportunity to do that quickly – and on the cheap.

'Project Adder' was able to use development cars with old MGB bodywork and progressed at lightning pace in the hands of Rover Special Products, but more had to be changed on the new car than initially hoped. Both the front and rear suspension required significant updating: in all, just 5% of the RV8's components were carried over from the MGB unaltered, although 75% of the parts were modified rather than outright new designs. Nonetheless, the model was developed in less than two years.

With these three cars together, the TVR's uncluttered bodywork marks it out as the sole clean-sheet design of the group. There are no afterthought widened wheelarches or bonnet bulges to house pesky unplanned-for plenums. And yet, with its cowled headlights, sweeping curves and clean surfacing, it is clearly still a shape with one eye on the ideals of the past. It would struggle to be a bigger departure from the 'wedges' that preceded it, but the pointed nose and plump tail give it a subtly tapered silhouette. The purple hue of this Griffith, however, marks it clearly as a TVR of the '90s.

The Marcos is all about classical proportions. In its details it can be a bit fussy – the earlier, GT-based cars without the wide arches are sleeker – but its classic two-seater proportions of long bonnet, cabin over the back axle and squat rear are timeless. Even in the 1980s, when its flowing side profile was unfashionable, the Mantula was still a pretty car, but by the 1990s the old Marcos shape was back in vogue.

The same could be said of the MG RV8. Unlike the TVR and Marcos, however, it has proved a controversial design. It's handsome in profile, but the rear demonstrates the pitfalls of working with steel for such a low-volume product. The boot and rear panel come straight from the original MGB, while everything else, including the bespoke tail-lights, looks like a bubbly plastic add-on. The front works better, with Rover having splashed out on new bonnet and wing pressings to create a fresh face for the car. Alternative styling experiments with cowled headlights looked even better, but were less authentic to the original MGB, so for a source Rover turned to that other company still making a 1960s sports car: Porsche.

All three roadsters have old-school appeal but achieve it in a different manner, and these characters continue behind the wheel. The Mantara is the most bare-knuckle, the most

From top: TVR is agile and aggressive, but manageable – at least in the dry; Marcos seats its driver lowest of all; RV8's tail-lights are bespoke, but non-handed to help keep the costs down

From top: Griffith dash was a taste of things to come; Rover Group switchgear in Marcos; one-piece dash veneer and sumptuous leather for MG

authentically old-fashioned in feel. Its seating position is almost lying on the floor, like a single-seater, making all but the tallest drivers feel very low. Stretching back to the original Marcos GT, the seats – really just pads stuck to the body tub – are fixed, and instead the pedals are electrically adjusted to suit each driver's height. There's a flavour of Jaguar E-type S3 in both the view down the long, bulging bonnet ahead – you struggle to see the end of it – and in the shape of the dashboard, with its strip of rocker switches and row of dials.

The Rover-sourced transmission has a long throw, and those electrically positioned pedals have lengthy movements, all requiring a firm shove to elicit a response from each control. This makes every dab of throttle and stab of brakes quite deliberate, thrilling even, but it is difficult to drive the Marcos with real precision. It deploys its hefty V8 torque with little in the way of sophistication, so it's a case of hustling the Marcos through every bend. Relatively firm in its springing, the car reacts promptly to corrections, helped by quick steering, but it will bounce and rattle over bumps, sometimes with considerable scuttle shake. The Mantara does a very good impression of a 1960s sports car, just with a bit of extra poke, slightly better brakes and electric windows.

The MG takes more of a middle ground. With a leaf-sprung rear end, its chassis has the oldest lineage, but it was thoroughly updated by the

'Rover's aim for the RV8 was to build a classic car but without the commensurate foibles and inconveniences'

engineers at Rover and has a much softer character as a result. It can feel under-damped at times, but it's a much more comfortable ride than either of the other two. With this Japanese-market car's air conditioning and retrofitted power steering (a rare factory option only offered at the end of production), it's really more of a GT with a fold-down roof.

At odds with the Marcos, the RV8's seating position is actually rather high – more so than an original MGB, presumably due to its thicker modern seats; it can feel a bit exposed as a result. There's no rollbar, the beltline is low and the windscreen surround, while redesigned for the car, is just sheet steel and the tops of many drivers' heads will poke above it anyway. That does at least provide much better vision; in the high-backed Marcos in particular, but also the Griffith, it's impossible to retain the same awareness of your surroundings.

Rover's aim for the RV8 was to build a classic car without the commensurate foibles and inconveniences. It is certainly the comfiest and

From top: TVR door and bonnet hinges hide behind other panels for a cleaner look; Marcos requires deliberate inputs; MG's lights are from a 911, with cowling to cover distinctive peak

most drivable of the three, but it is also the weakest dynamically. Its floaty ride doesn't help the steering, which can get disconcertingly light over bumps and crests. Despite having the same 187bhp as the Marcos, the RV8's extra 260kg robs it of the Mantara's eagerness on the throttle. While the 0-60mph figures of the cars vary little on paper, the MG really needs to be wound up and revved hard to deliver its performance. It is still capable of a brisk turn of speed, but it needs to work to achieve it and doesn't have the addictive throttle response of the Rover lumps in the other two.

The first thought after a quick drive in the Griffith is that it feels as if it's in a different league from its rivals – and there's no denying that in outright performance, at least. Weighing virtually the same as the Marcos, but with TVR Power's version of the V8, its acceleration is savage in comparison. It loses a little bit of that olde-worlde charm in the process, but the Coventry tuner's good work takes the Rover unit from a classic burbler to a much racier, more serious place. It revs freely and provides motive effort with a delightful linearity, right up to its redline. It's clearly a more sporting motor compared with the lazy crate unit.

Its chassis is more advanced than those of the MG and Marcos, too, with properly located suspension that won't be thrown by mid-corner changes in the road surface, but its rigidity is most impressive. It's the only one of the trio that avoids significant scuttle shake; combined with a tightness in the steering and suspension, it feels easily the most agile. Its steering, with just 2.2 turns from lock to lock, is straight from the track, and the TVR darts with each direction change. You have to grab the small wheel firmly at all times, though, or the unassisted helm will jump around in your hands. It never relaxes, but communicates everything.

Despite its reputation for being unforgiving, this 4-litre Griffith doesn't intimidate in the dry, but it is easy to see how the 5-litre model would gain such notoriety. A short wheelbase makes the TVR twitchy, as does the quick steering. It's the opposite to the Marcos: you have to be precise in the Griff. Play around with big lumps of throttle or sudden steering inputs and it will deliver you to the nearest hedge. It's firmly sprung, too, and over-damped – although this car's owner later admitted to maladjusted shock absorbers, on too high a setting.

'The TVR is the most agile. You have to grab the small wheel firmly or the unassisted helm will jump around in your hands'

At odds with its frantic road manners is the impressively comfortable cabin. The sculpted dashboard resembles a miniature skate park: its gentle scoops and peaks are a sign of the madness to follow in future TVRs, but it's still restrained enough here to appeal to more conservative eyes. It was a clever move from TVR: those soft curves imitate the injection-moulded interiors of the day and disguise what was a low-volume dash of glassfibre and wood.

All three of these sports cars attempted to rekindle the old way of doing things, judging that some drivers were left cold by the increasing sophistication of '90s performance machinery. But while it was Rover that claimed to be building a modernised classic with the RV8, it's the Marcos that actually does that best. For those whose dream is of the raw V8 sports cars of the '60s, a Sunbeam Tiger or an original Griffith, but can neither afford one nor fancy spending weekends adjusting carburettors, the Mantara is the bargain answer.

The RV8's talents proved a challenging sell in period: cars such as the Griffith outran it on sporting appeal, while plenty of mainstream rivals beat it for comfort. A lukewarm reception at home sent Rover to a Japanese market in the grip of Brit-fever to sell the hoped-for numbers, but today the RV8 makes sense as a characterful alternative to a Mercedes-Benz SL. If you're looking to revel in the rumble of a V8 without sacrificing too much drivability, the MG provides just that – and it's the cheapest of this trio today, both to buy and to run.

The Griffith, however, while not without its flaws – namely uptight handling and a hardly stellar reliability record – is the real power-for-your-pound champion. Its thrilling, combative driving manners won't be to everyone's taste, but TVR was the only one of the three that took a Rover V8 and created a car capable of holding its own against the Porsche 911. The fact that it is still available for less than half of what a contemporary 911 will cost makes it one of the best buys anywhere in the classic car world, let alone among this class of '92.

TVR GRIFFITH

Sold/number built 1992-2002/2582
Construction tubular steel backbone chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv, 16v 3946cc V8, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 236bhp @ 5250rpm
Max torque 270lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil-over dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes vented front, solid rear discs, with servo
Length 13ft (3965mm)
Width 6ft 5in (1943mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1185mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 6in (2286mm)
Weight 2303lb (1045kg)
0-60mph 4.8 secs
Top speed 146mph **Mpg** 19
Price new £28,965 (1992)

MARCOS MANTARA

Sold/number built 1992-'98/192
Construction steel spaceframe chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, ohv, 16v 3946cc V8, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 187bhp @ 4750rpm
Max torque 231lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts, lower links **rear** double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes vented front, solid rear discs
Length 13ft 2in (4005mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1680mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1150mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 5in (2273mm)
Weight 2248lb (1020kg)
0-60mph 6 secs
Top speed 131mph **Mpg** 20
Price new £29,398 (1994)

MG RV8

Sold/number built 1992-'95/1983
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, ohv, 16v 3946cc V8, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 187bhp @ 4750rpm
Max torque 231lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs **rear** live axle, lower control arms, semi-elliptic leaf springs; telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes vented discs front, drums rear, with servo
Length 13ft 2in (4010mm)
Width 5ft 7in (1694mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1320mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 8in (2330mm)
Weight 2821lb (1280kg)
0-60mph 5.9 secs
Top speed 135mph **Mpg** 20
Price new £26,500 (1993)

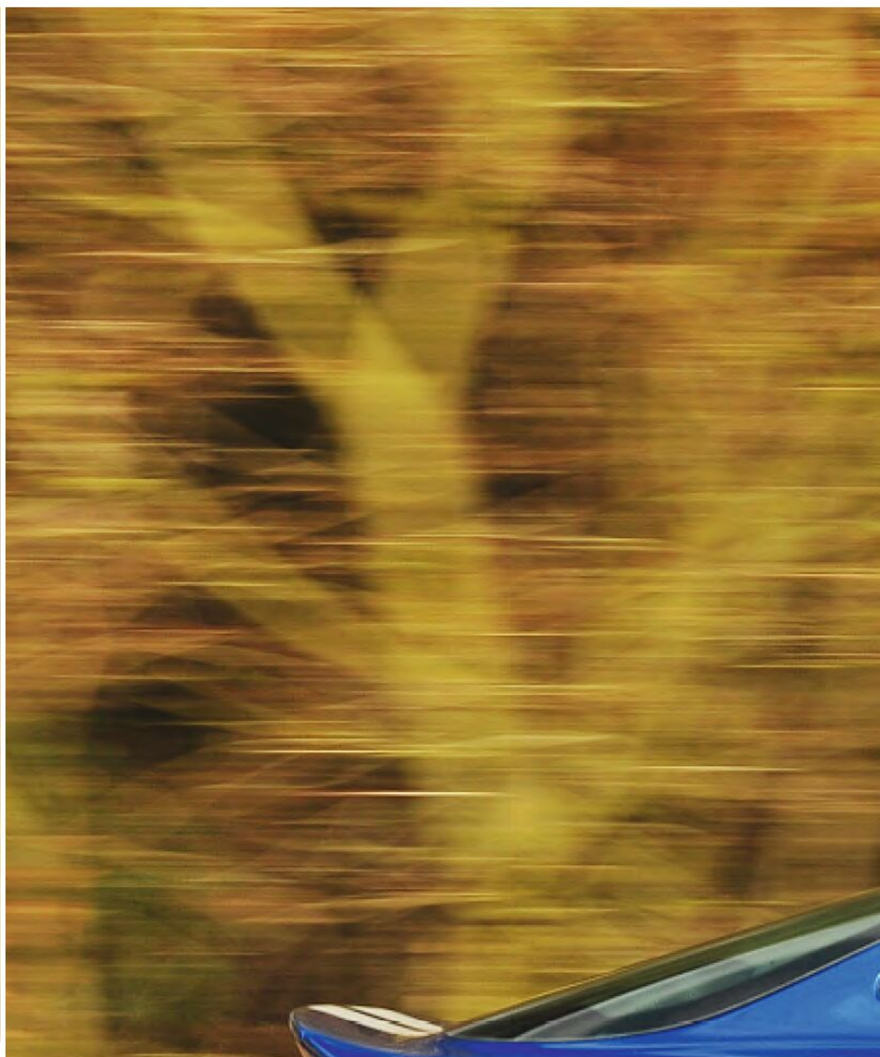
All three provide a convincing facsimile of a '60s sports car, but the MG is more GT while the TVR has a raw edge, with the Marcos in between

FAST AND FURIOUS

When it comes to the TVR Cerbera and Chrysler Viper, only extroverts in search of a wild ride need apply

WORDS **STEVE SUTCLIFFE** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW**

VPR
VIPER GTS



From top: Viper is far happier being a GT than a sports car; it was a Chrysler in the UK, but a Dodge in its home market; monstrous 8-litre V10; cabin is let down by the quality of the materials

They nicknamed the Viper GTS the ‘double bubble’ in the United States of America, which is of course where this monster of a car originally came from. Although its roof may well have had a pair of extra bumps on it, a simple touch that provided the GTS with infinitely more sex appeal than the regular Viper RT/10 roadster upon which it was based, beneath its more seductive blue and white-striped skin it was, in fact, largely the same car. And there was absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Because, when all was said and done with the Viper, in GTS trim or otherwise, at the heart of this car sat a thumping-great 8-litre V10 engine. It didn’t much matter whether it was installed in a car that did or didn’t have a roof; either way, it provided whoever was lucky (or brave) enough to have climbed behind the wheel with an almighty hit of performance that few European rivals could deal with at the time. Except, perhaps, for one particular car that was made in Blackpool, Lancashire.

Unleashed upon the world by TVR in the same year as the Viper GTS, the Cerbera had

'Here was a car with the sort of presence that instantly drew a large audience'

a name derived from that of the mythical beast that guarded the gates of Hades. And unlike many such misappropriated titles, this one looked quite appropriate. Never more so than when it was applied to the final 4.5-litre model, which boasted another 70bhp in comparison with the original 4.2, and which had even more seismic performance as a result.

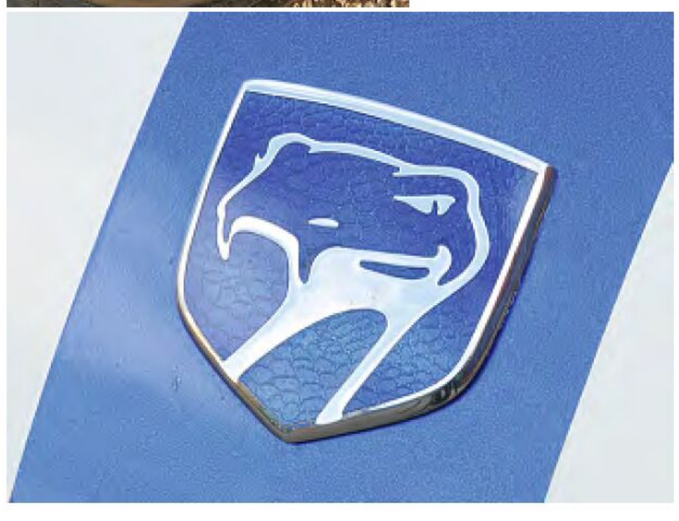
What mattered most with the Cerbera, what defined it as a car that could roast pretty much anything this side of a full-blown supercar at the time, was its weight. Or, to be more specific, its lack of weight compared with The Rest.

In simple terms, the Cerbera weighed just 1060kg (2337lb) at a time when a regular BMW 3 Series tipped the scales at around 1500kg. Yet it also happened to have 420bhp and 380lb ft. Broadly speaking, that gave it 400bhp per tonne. So it was no surprise to discover that it had a level of acceleration that felt as if it could bend the space/time continuum.

Zero to 60mph came and went in 4.1 secs, and the dash to 100mph took just 8.9 secs. This, remember, was in the mid-1990s. There was nothing at remotely the same price (the TVR cost only £37,000 when new) that could get anywhere near its level of performance, save perhaps a Caterham with an unfeasibly big engine. Which is why, to begin with at least, the Cerbera proved to be so popular among the marque faithful. In essence, it offered Porsche 911 turbo levels of performance and practicality, for less than half the price. And for a while it was very much in a league of one.

Until, that is, the 450bhp, 490lb ft, 1531kg Viper GTS made its way across the pond and landed at its importer's headquarters just outside Dover. Here was a car with the sort of outrageous presence that would instantly attract a large audience – possibly drawn by the sunshine glinting off the chromed wheels – most of whom couldn't believe their eyes: the Viper looked like a cartoon made real. Personally, I always thought it looked fantastic, with a primal appeal that immediately made you want to take it for a drive – at which point the Viper GTS experience tended to go one of two ways: you either loved it or you hated it. There was rarely much ground in between, and there were all sorts of reasons why it split opinion so sharply.

One: the cabin quality was breathtakingly awful, to the point where it felt a bit as if you had climbed inside a giant children's toy. Two:



From top: the droop-snouted Viper has an imposing road presence; five-spoke chromed alloys add bling; badge with bite

'In the TVR, you feel connected to the road in a way that few other cars can replicate'

it was left-hand-drive only. Three: in part because it was left-hand-drive only, it felt as if it was approximately 20ft wide when you were sitting, so low down, behind its huge adjustable leather steering wheel. Four: the gearbox and clutch felt as if they had come out of a truck, not a sports car – mainly because they had come out of a truck, and not a sports car.

So, during those first vital few seconds of getting into and driving a Viper GTS, people tended to either want to climb out and run away, or they were beguiled and intrigued: amazed at how different it felt compared with 'normal' cars; excited by how much torque it appeared to deliver at the merest twitch of your big toe. I was very much in camp number two. I wanted more of the GTS, and I wanted it right there and then.

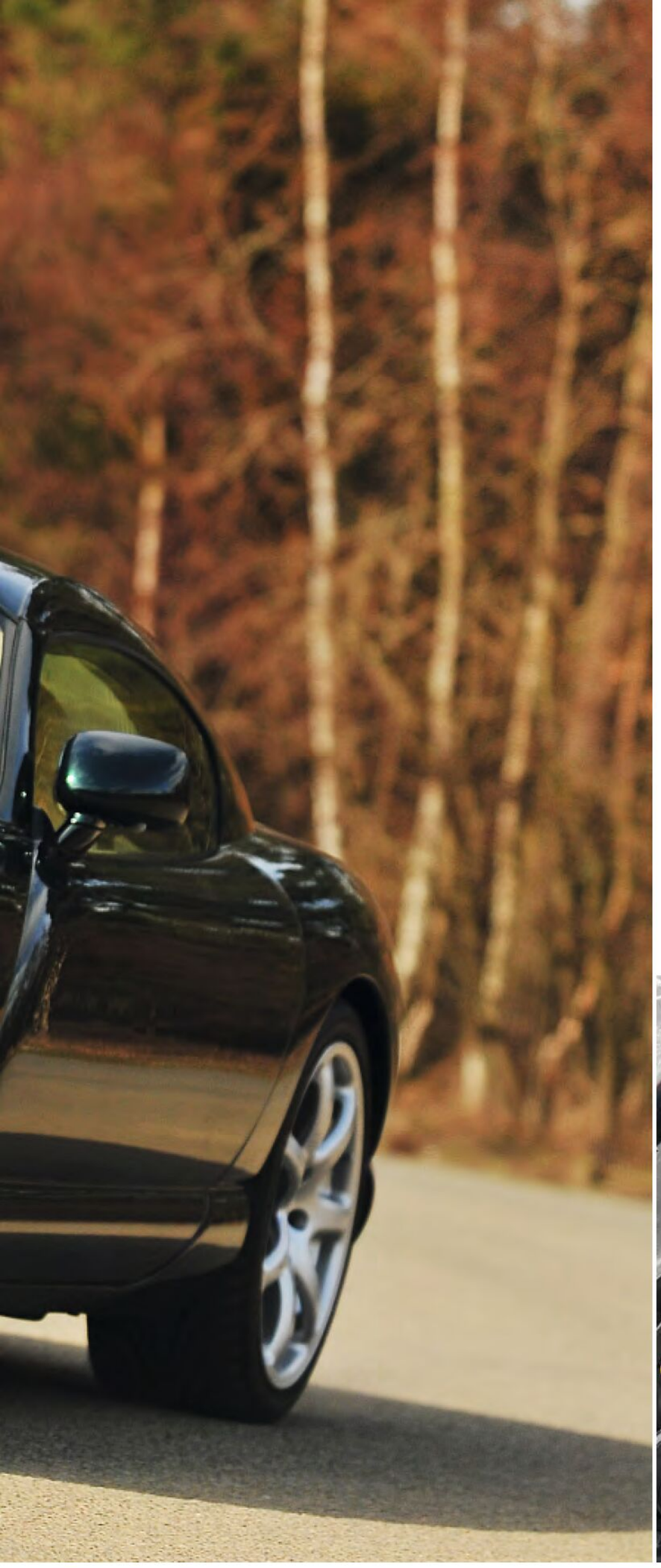
In its latest coupé form, the Viper was a natural rival to the TVR, a fact that didn't escape the motoring press of the time: *Autocar* was soon pitching the two in a head-to-head comparison. Over the intervening years, however, cars such as the Viper and Cerbera – and, indeed, TVR itself – have disappeared into the ether, drowned in a sea of expensive electronics and a wealth of more practical, rather more reliable rivals from Germany. But, as both of the examples that you see here quite clearly illustrate, they are still very much larger-than-life cars today, even if it would take a certain type of person to entertain the idea of owning either one of them.

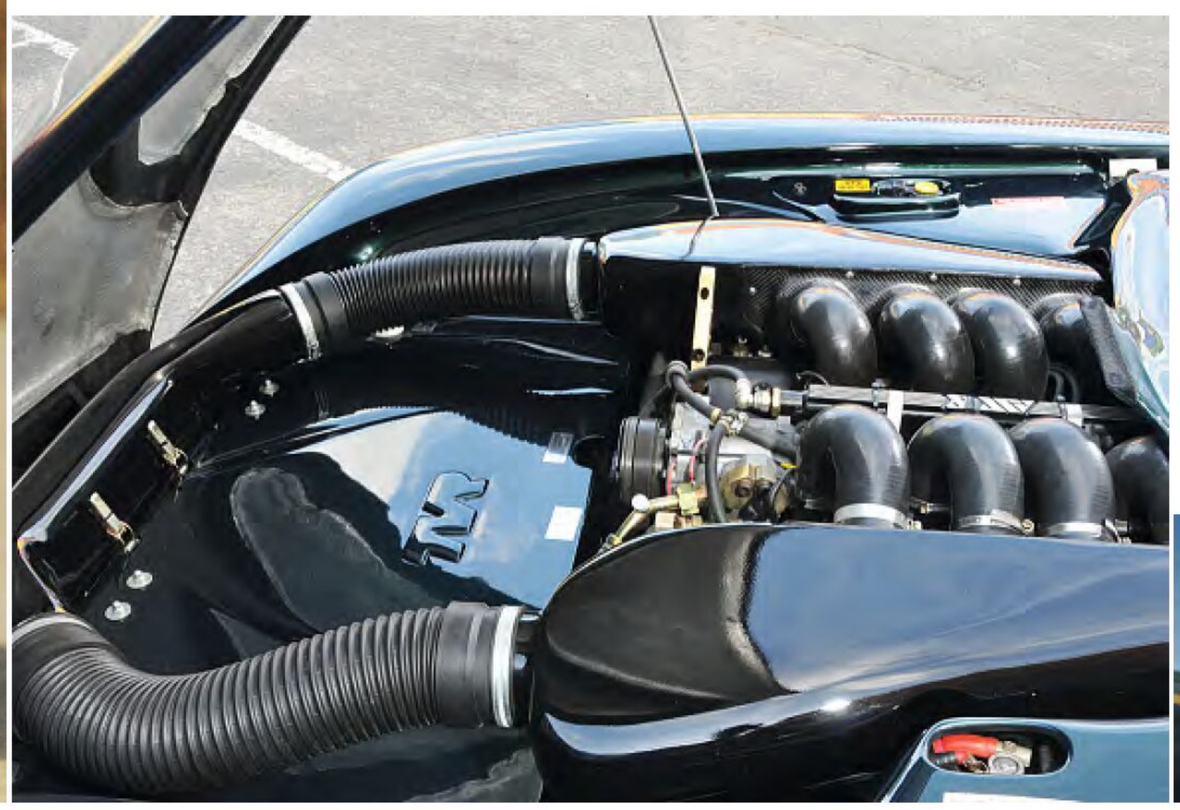
The Cerbera is a 4.5 and unquestionably one of the tidiest examples in the UK right now, hence it wearing a surprisingly high price-tag – a figure it nonetheless sold for just two days after we drove it. Of all the many Cerberas that I have driven over the years, it's probably the sweetest I've yet encountered.

It looks and even smells new inside, but it also has a feeling of 'completeness' to it that, for whatever reason, always seemed to elude the cars that emanated direct from the factory. And my goodness, it still goes well. Time quite often nullifies the effects of power and performance: what felt rabid in 1996 tends to seem nothing like as shattering now. But not the Cerbera.

This one feels just as explosive in a straight line as I remember it being back then, and it has just as delicious a gearchange, with the same instant throttle response and that hyper-quick steering rack that so defined its driving experience all those years ago.

From top: fast rack means that TVR turns in keenly – small lights were part of 2000 facelift; later multi-spoke alloys; 4.5 was the most potent engine offered



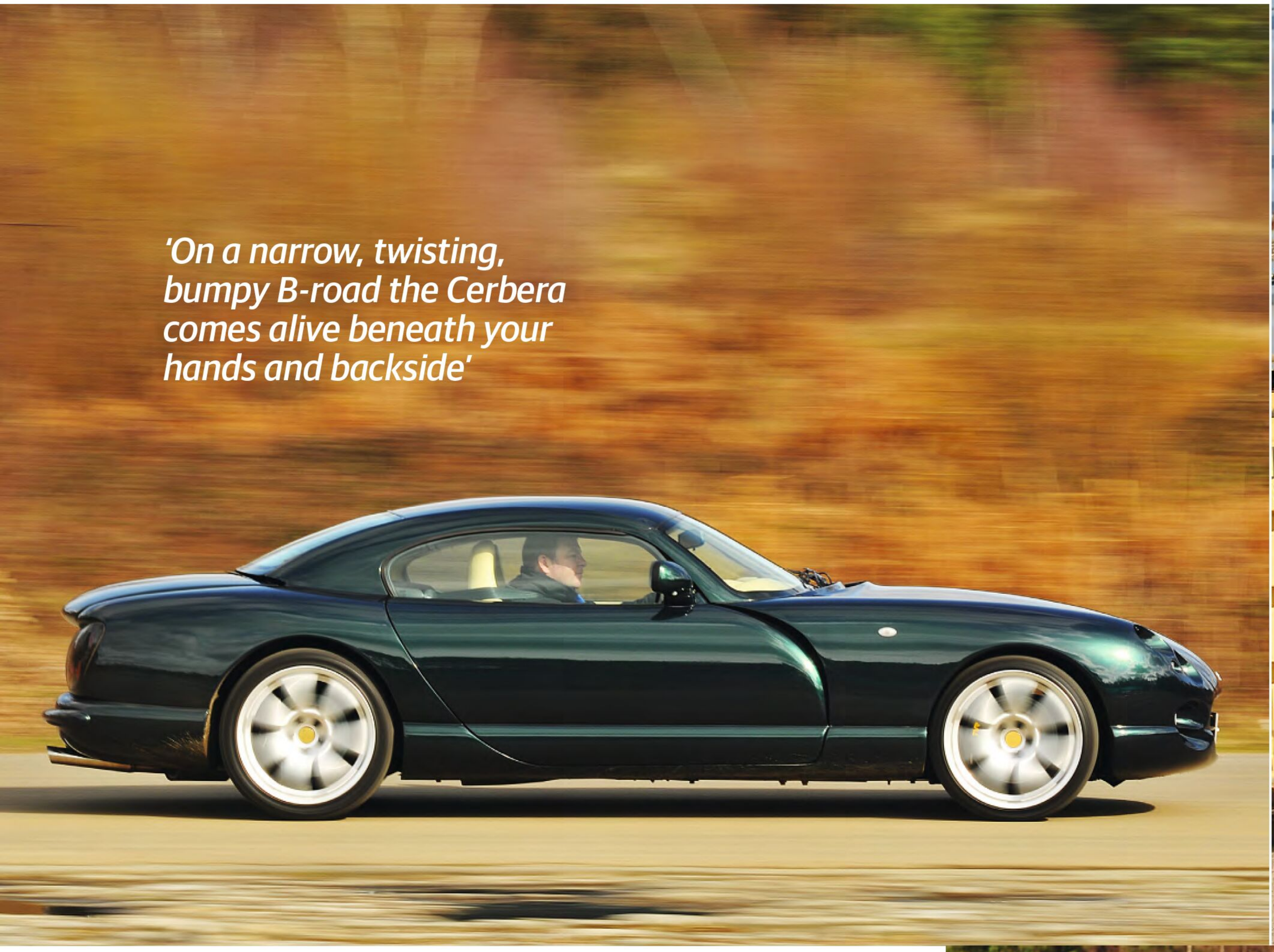


From top: straight-line performance is little short of epic, with 0-100mph taking just 8.9 secs; AJP8 engine was an all-new design for TVR; opulent cabin is a stark contrast to that of the Viper

The seating position in a Cerbera is not something you forget quickly, and it did still feels quite shocking in this example. You sit incredibly low down in the car, and the view forwards feels as if you are looking through a letterbox. To begin with, it can be pretty intimidating climbing aboard a Cerbera, blipping the throttle, feeling the torque rock the bodyshell and wondering what it will feel like when you start to push it.

But the further you drive in this car, the friendlier it becomes. That somewhat restricted vista is a direct result of there being a full rollcage installed, and this serves as a constant reminder that you are driving something that does not have traction control and does not have anti-lock braking, but which is fundamentally going to look after you should things go wrong.

You are connected to the road in a Cerbera in a way that few other cars at any price can replicate, and in the end it all boils down to that remarkably low weight. You steer it towards the apex of a corner, and it tracks there with almost zero unwanted inertia to overcome. The same thing applies to the way this car stops, and the way it accelerates:



From top: 'chopped' roofline gives the Cerbera a sleek profile; Viper is even more extrovert, with its long snout and aggressive stance

the further down you squeeze its unusually long-travel accelerator, the harder it goes. It sounds rather lovely, too.

But then so does the Viper, albeit in an entirely different, deeper-chested kind of way. As with the Cerbera, the GTS feels, sounds and even smells intimidating when first you get inside it. All of its buttons and controls are huge, including the gearlever, and for a while you cannot help but wonder how much sophistication there can actually be lurking beneath such a seemingly simple machine. Just as happens in the TVR, though, you eventually drop into a rhythm when driving the mighty Viper: you learn to wait for half a second before re-engaging the clutch on an upshift to avoid the momentum that's still fizzing through the flywheel; and you learn to steer it super-smoothly, using only tiny inputs – again because its rack is so fast in its responses and its power assistance is so strong.

Most of all, you learn *not* to get on the throttle pedal too aggressively if you are in any of the first four gear ratios. Do so and the V10 powerplant will do its best to unstick those vast rear tyres – and, more often than not, it will succeed, especially if the road is wet. Far better, you soon realise, to get the Viper GTS rolling along in fourth and fifth using its torque, not its power, to propel you onwards.

The ride will still be very firm, the brakes similarly keen and the steering unfathomably quick to begin with – but at least you won't feel as if you have been attached to the side of a missile, the guidance system of which is being operated by someone else. In the higher gears – and there are six of them in total – a Viper GTS can even be relatively docile. The car's famously long top ratio, which is good for around 44mph per 1000rpm, means that you can trundle along in it quite calmly, with the V10 thrumming away at barely more than tickover at the legal limit. It is a remarkably agreeable motorway companion.

To be perfectly honest, however, the Viper GTS isn't really that good at being a sports car, if and when the occasion arises and you find yourself on a narrow, twisty, bumpy B-road – the sort of terrain on which a Cerbera really does come alive beneath your hands and backside. It is simply too big and a touch too clumsy for roads such as this, and it is far more suited to cruising down dual carriageways and attacking the horizon when exiting roundabouts from time to time.

When it comes to choosing between them, I should perhaps declare an interest. I ran a Cerbera – fitted with the earlier, 4.2-litre engine – when it was new. It was a maniac of a car that let me down a lot more than once, but I adored

it all the same because it adhered so perfectly to TVR boss Peter Wheeler's simple mantra for car design: it looked stunning, it didn't cost the earth and it went like stink. Much like the Viper GTS, in fact – and I still adore everything that the American car stands for.

Were it my money, though – and our two featured examples would today set you back a similar amount – I'd cross my fingers, curl my toes, look to the skies, hope against hope that nothing untoward went wrong, and go for the TVR. I always did have a soft spot for the Cerbera. Back in the mid-1990s, it was one of the most exciting cars that I'd ever driven. I'm delighted to report that not a great deal has changed in the intervening years.

That said, there remains a substantial part of me that would love to own a Viper GTS, just for a month or so, simply to see what running a car such as this might be like.

Thanks to *DMS Cars for the Viper (dmscars.com); Str8six for the Cerbera (01844 352735; str8six.co.uk)*

CHRYSLER VIPER GTS

Sold/number built 1996-2002/7117
Construction steel chassis, glassfibre composite bodywork
Engine all-alloy, ohv 7986cc V10, multi-point fuel injection
Max power 450bhp @ 5200rpm
Max torque 490lb ft @ 3700rpm
Transmission six-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil-over dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with servo
Length 14ft 9in (4496mm)
Width 6ft 3¾in (1923mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1194mm)
Wheelbase 8ft ¼in (2443mm)
Weight 3375lb (1531kg)
0-60mph 4 secs
Top speed 177mph **Mpg** 10-20
Price new £59,500

TVR CERBERA 4.5

Sold/number built 1996-2003/1578
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 4475cc V8, electronic fuel injection
Max power 420bhp @ 6750rpm
Max torque 380lb ft @ 5500rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil-over dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs
Length 14ft ½in (4280mm)
Width 6ft 1½in (1865mm)
Height 4ft (1220mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 5in (2566mm)
Weight 2337lb (1060kg)
0-60mph 4.1 secs
Top speed 180mph **Mpg** 18-25
Price new £37,000

THREE-WAY SPLIT

The TVR Tuscan, Porsche 911 and Noble M12 share common goals, but disagree on how they should be achieved. Which is right?

WORDS **SIMON HUCKNALL** PHOTOGRAPHY **JOHN BRADSHAW**

Lee Noble seldom pulled any punches – the fist-sized impression in his office wall told you all you needed to know. But that went with the territory: as a breed, low-volume sports car makers are perennially under-financed and over-stretched, ricocheting between the triumph of a five-star review and the ignominy of kowtowing to accountants who generally lack empathy with the product. Which, in Lee's case, explained the damaged plasterboard.

But the resounding success of the Noble M12 GTO series had kept the backers on his side. Lee had, in effect, been developing the concept of a lightweight, mid-engined, high-performance sports car since his time at Ultima in the early 1980s. Not until the formation of Noble Automotive in 1998, though, did he really start to gain cut-though in the wider enthusiast market.

That was thanks, on the whole, to coverage in the motoring magazines. "I didn't have the budget to advertise," says Lee, "so it was the press or nothing." Which was borne out after *Autocar* drove the M12's predecessor, the M10 roadster, and declared it: 'One of the most complete and exciting British mid-engined two-seaters we've driven.' All the same, the open-topped M10 lacked the design flair and performance to do its chassis justice, both of which were remedied the following year with the launch of the M12 GTO. Looking like a Group C track refugee, it retained the M10's accomplished platform, but here it was clothed with a closed glassfibre body built over a steel spaceframe, made ultra-stiff with bonded and riveted aluminium panels and an integral rollcage. The classic set-up of unequal-length double-wishbone suspension, with aluminium uprights and Koni adjustable dampers, was honed by Lee to offer a combination of fine control and handling, allied to decent compliance for the road.

All of that would have been for nothing, though, had it been fitted with the M10's rather anaemic atmospheric V6 engine. Noble's logic of employing a proprietary Ford unit – in this case the relatively new, all-alloy 2.5-litre Duratec powerplant – was sound: it was fairly advanced, type-approved around the world and in plentiful supply. It was also durable enough to accept the twin Garrett T25 water-cooled turbochargers and air-to-air intercooler that Noble added, hiking power from 168bhp to 310bhp. For 0-100mph performance, the first iteration of the M12 was trading blows with lesser Ferrari models – as well as adopting what would become its trademark 'Darth Vader in the boot' (a Jeremy Clarkson quip) soundtrack. The fact that the Noble was manufactured in Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth), with only the powertrain installed in Noble's Barwell factory, barely registered with buyers – especially when it all came with a tantalisingly low price of just £44,950.

The GTO-3R model with us today cost another five grand when it was launched three years later, in 2003 (although by then with 352bhp and a more advanced, six-speed gearbox mated to a Quaife automatic torque-biasing differential), but its price was still head-to-head with the more powerful, £49,595 TVR Tuscan S – and, if you stretched your hire-purchase payments to just over £60k, the Porsche 911 Carrera 4. Which is why they're both joining the Noble here, creating a diverse trio of early-century sub-supercar models representing not only low- and high-volume manufacturing, but also three different engine locations: rear, mid, and front/mid.

Peter Wheeler was to TVR what Lee was to Noble: a company patriarch whose forthright design and engineering ideologies had a direct bearing on the cars the Blackpool factory built. Also like Lee, Wheeler had a long history in low-volume car production, having bought TVR in 1980, taking it out of the wilderness and transforming it into a maker of some of the most dramatic automotive creations in the business. But Wheeler's methodology could not have been more different – at least not in the final few years before he sold TVR to Russian investor Nikolay Smolenski in 2004. The thought of farming out most of the production processes and using another manufacturer's powertrains – more so, ones from a bread-and-butter brand such as Ford – was by then anathema to Wheeler.

The Tuscan S epitomised that philosophy to a tee. Originally launched as the Tuscan Speed Six in 1999, the majority of its componentry was manufactured at the Bristol Avenue works in Blackpool, along with all car assembly. Whereas earlier TVRs had used proprietary

From top: Noble takes a no-holds-barred approach to aero; Porsche's pop-up rear 'tea tray'; TVR's fixed spoiler blends in nicely

In the real world the 911 is the most usable as a day-to-day car, but the Tuscan S and M12 have head-turning character and personality to burn

The M12 leads on outright thrills, but is surprisingly docile at low speed. TVR's Speed Six delivers explosive power – and noise

engines, such as the Chimaera's Rover V8, in various capacities, from the outset the Tuscan was powered by TVR's in-house, Al Melling-designed 4-litre straight-six. Mounted in the front/mid-section of the car and sending drive to the rear wheels via a five-speed gearbox, the all-alloy, twin-cam Speed Six engine's output had risen from its original 350bhp to 390bhp by 2001, when the Tuscan S was revealed. It made for a fearsomely quick car: weighing 1090kg, the S had a power-to-weight ratio of 357bhp per tonne, which was enough for 0-60mph in 3.9 secs (about the same as a 2024 Aston Vantage) and a claimed 190mph top speed.

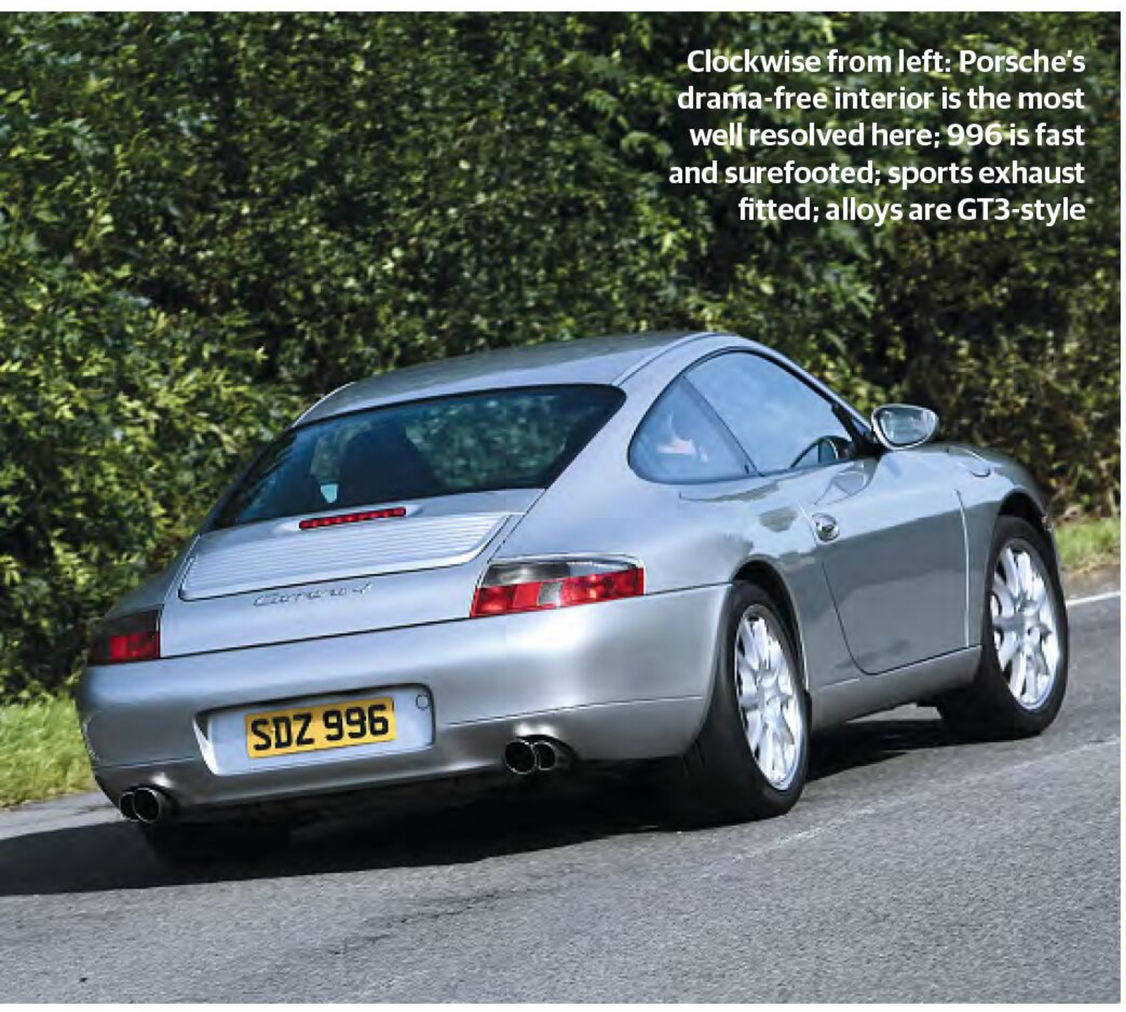
Yet despite the Tuscan's extraordinary grunt, it was conceived as an unashamed GT car. Designed by Damian McTaggart, its lines were extravagantly drawn, concept-car outlandish and dramatic enough to take pride of place on any teenager's wall. Glassfibre-skinned, like the Noble, over a tubular steel chassis suspended by double wishbones and coils all round, the TVR was also practical for long-distance schleps, with a capacious cabin and a large boot – big enough, in fact, to neatly accommodate the removable roof panel.

Would potential buyers of TVRs or Nobles even have considered the Porsche 911 two decades ago? Lee Noble obviously thought so, because he went out and bought one to evaluate (he liked it, too). There was actually a real shortage of rivals at the time, after the similarly priced Lotus Esprit had drawn its last breath and Hethel's planned replacement had amounted to nothing.

The latest, 996-series 911 was a seismic departure from that which had gone before, and it marked the first major overhaul of the enduring model since it was first seen in 1963 (as the 901). Revealed at the Frankfurt show in 1997, the new car, penned in-house by Pinky Lai, was still clearly identifiable as a 911 but had grown by 185mm in length and 40mm in width, yet was 50kg lighter in basic Carrera 2 guise and 45% stiffer, thanks to the use of high-strength steel in its construction.

Everything contained in the new body was as a result of either cost efficiencies (Porsche was slowly emerging from an early-'90s financial meltdown) or, even then, more stringent noise and emissions regulations. Hence, out went the previous 993's air-cooled engine, replaced by a quieter, cleaner water-cooled unit of 3.4-litre capacity and producing 300bhp. And, even though TVR and Noble would have developed entire ranges for a tenth of the £300million budget Porsche spent to bring its latest model to market, the new 911 shared componentry – such as its front suspension, mechanicals and some interior parts – with the previous year's Boxster, which resulted in a more competitive price. But this was still a proper 911 at heart, with the 993's front MacPherson strut set-up and multi-link rear end carried over, plus the

Clockwise from left: TVR's futurescape cabin outdoes exterior styling; Tuscan gets nervous at speed; striking details; reassuring brakes



Clockwise from left: Porsche's drama-free interior is the most well resolved here; 996 is fast and surefooted; sports exhaust fitted; alloys are GT3-style

Clockwise from left: cabin is of its era, with awkward access; 3R is a dynamic star by any measure: many Ford-sourced controls; standard wheels and brakes

signature, longitudinally mounted flat-six engine located behind its rear axle. Purists may have debated its authenticity, but – along with the Boxster and soon-to-arrive Cayenne – this 'imposter' 911 saved Porsche from oblivion.

Carl Shardlow's 2001 911 is a Carrera 4 model, which arrived a year into 996 production. In this pre-facelift guise, the C4 had an identical power output to the Carrera 2, but came with permanent all-wheel drive, split 5:95 front to rear but allowing up to 40% to be delivered to the front wheels if the system sensed a lack of traction at the back. Other than the engine-cover badge, though, the C4 was externally no different from the C2. To my mind, these early 996-series cars most closely resemble the original 1963 design before successive models became ever wider at the back and lost their purity of form. Other than the optional GT3 alloys and sports exhaust, Carl's C4 is standard and, 23 years and 71,000 miles on, has stood the test of time exceptionally well. It's also the most comfortable and ergonomically complete car of our three – which, given the reputation of previous 911s, is a relief. You face an attractive three-spoke, leather-rimmed wheel, behind which are five overlapping dials for fuel, speed, revs and ancillaries, much as you would find in

'The Porsche's talent lies in its ability to dispatch fast, demanding roads while imposing minimal demands on the driver'

a Boxster of this era. Switchgear is neatly laid out, and the reach/rake-adjustable wheel gives you a near-perfect driving position. The pedals – slightly offset to the left, with a floor-mounted throttle – are ideal for heel-and-toe shifts.

With 296bhp and weighing 1375kg, the C4 is the least powerful and heaviest of our trio by some margin. But while the Noble and TVR would out-drag it off the line, the Porsche's real talent lies in its ability to dispatch fast, demanding, multi-surfaced roads while imposing minimal demands on the driver. The power steering is nicely weighted and linear on turn-in, and it provides enough feedback to keep you engaged without being too quick off the straight-ahead. Likewise, when you're up to speed, body control is excellent, and while the ride is firm, it's never jarring. The engine is a peach: hugely flexible and big-lunged, giving you the choice of a relaxed cruise (a relatively high 27mph per 1000rpm in top helps), or downshifting a couple of gears through the slick, narrow-gated 'box and enjoying the flat-six's muted howl as you rip up to the 7000rpm

redline. The brakes are strong and progressive, and – in the dry, at least – grip is unimpeachable: a trace of understeer, but the rears just won't let go. In short, if you were Monaco-bound from Grenoble, across the Alps, the Porsche would be your weapon of choice: 95% as quick as the others, but with 50% of the drama.

Not so the TVR. Its shape alone would garner a BAFTA for dramatic art, and that's before you fire it up. From the voluptuous front end, with its sculpted bonnet shrink-wrapping the Speed Six lump beneath it, to the cut-outs between the front wings and the doors, and back to the triple-stacked tail-lights, nothing about the Tuscan S is 'regular'. You open the door by pressing a button beneath the outside mirror, then sink low into a cabin swathed from floor to scuttle in leather. There's a Jules Verne-like look about the aluminium instrument pod, with its racer-style, multi-function digital display and gold-coloured surround, inlaid with speedometer increments up to 200mph. Unmarked, knurled buttons set into alloy fillets on either side of the broad transmission tunnel continue the theme. It is all beautifully finished, too, and makes the Porsche's cabin feel decidedly ordinary (let alone the Noble's).

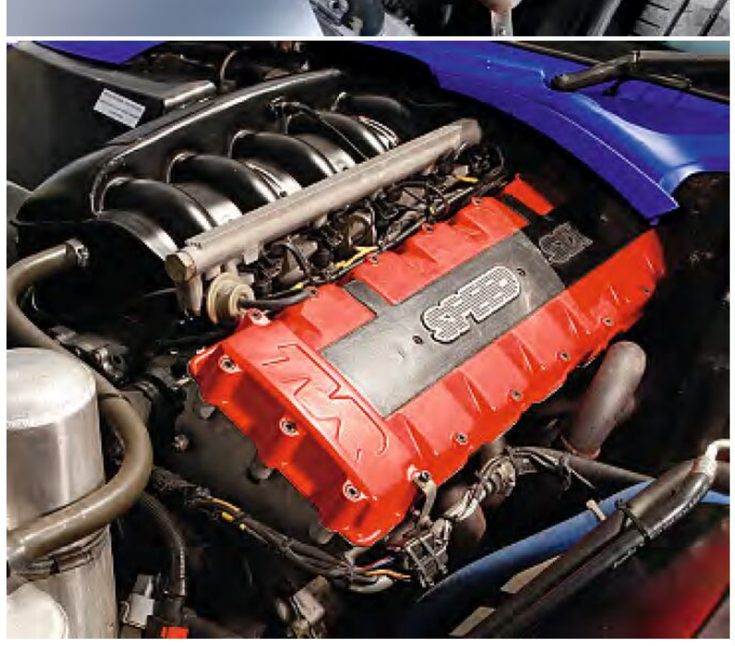
I have to admit to some reservations about driving a Tuscan S again, after the original press car I tested for *Autocar* in 2002 didn't exactly cover itself in glory. Then again, TVR's development engineers – aka the cars' owners – worked hard to address many of the issues that beset early cars. One of them was Matt Wade, who has owned 'our' lovely example for the past six years. With its steering column only adjustable for rake and long, floor-mounted pedals, the driving position is not quite up to Porsche standards. But you can almost forgive that when you turn the key and hear the first deep bark from the TVR's straight-six. Even at lower revs it feels and sounds race-honed, and in another league from the 911 and M12. But you need to work it hard for best effect. Throttle response is superb – again, the best here – and performance is genuinely explosive in the upper reaches, where the 'six' sounds like a flat-plane-crank Formula One engine from the '50s. Dynamically it's enthralling, for sure, but only up to a point. The super-quick steering is alive with feel and feedback, but it starts to feel nervous at higher speeds. Yet while there's ample grip, an overly firm front end and soft rear set-up forces you to curb any enthusiasm for fear of it running away with you. However, the Tuscan redeems itself with excellent brakes, which are rich in feel and power.

So where does the Noble fit in? Ant Day's M12 GTO-3R is actually the most powerful car here, having been remapped to produce 420bhp – around 70bhp more than standard and more akin to that of the M400 model's output. But so many owners have treated the stock M12 as a blank canvas for upgrades that few original-spec cars remain. Tellingly, Ant has left the chassis alone, so we'll see how well it deals with an extra 20% of output. (The M400 came with Dynamics race dampers, uprated springs, a front anti-roll bar and Pirelli P Zero Corsa tyres, in support of its 425bhp.)

There's no elegant route into an M12: head-first, then backside, followed by legs, gets you ensconced in the buttock-nipping, leather-trimmed bucket seat; 'pared-down' best describes the cabin. The PlayStation-style wheel looks slightly naff, but, being multi-adjustable, it does afford you a decent driving position. There's a plethora of Ford-sourced heater controls (air-con was standard), and while the four clocks that sprout from the hard plastic dash moulding – along with a turbo boost gauge on the centre stack – look fairly basic, ergonomically they work well. Turn the key and press the starter, and you're rewarded with an exhaust note that sounds more like that of the 911 than the humble Mondeo with which the Noble shared its basic mechanicals. At low speeds the M12 is unremarkable: the six-speed, Ford-sourced 'box is slightly mushy but accurate enough; the steering is quite light and undemanding; and, other than being sensitive to road cambers, it's an easy car to pootle in, with good forward (but appalling rear) vision and a supple ride that sits somewhere between the 911 and the Tuscan.

Then you find The Road and, frankly, it disappears into the distance. I've timed an M400 at 3.5 secs to 60mph and 8.0 secs dead to 100mph, and unsurprisingly Ant's car feels comparable. Yet it's the Noble's gut-wrenching mid-range that really sets it apart. The turbos enter the fray progressively, but from around 3000rpm there's no let-up; you don't actually need to bother the engine's upper reaches, because there's so much thrust below 5000rpm. And while the Tuscan S wouldn't be that far behind in outright velocity, the Noble's chassis has an otherworldly competence that allows you to exploit so much more of it. We're treating this as a modern classic, but few new sporting cars, with their extra mass and unsprung weight, would compete point-to-point with the M12. Its mind-bending levels of body control, huge overall grip and finely judged balance make it the dynamic victor here today.

Of course, the Noble won't be for everyone. It can't hold a candle to the TVR for style and panache, or the exquisite charm of its cabin. And of the three cars here, the Porsche is realistically the only one you'd use day in, day out without a care – and still be able to enjoy it as a thoroughbred sports car when the fancy takes you. But as a purist driving tool, nothing comes close to the Noble. C&SC



From top: 911's 296bhp flat-six sits at the back; M12's brutal mid-mounted V6 makes 420bhp here; TVR's front-mid-mounted Speed Six produces 390bhp

TVR TUSCAN S

Sold/number built 1999-2006/1677 (all Speed Six/Tuscans)
Construction tubular steel chassis with outriggers, glassfibre body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3996cc straight-six, MBE Systems engine management with sequential fuel injection
Max power 390bhp @ 7500rpm
Max torque 330lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 12¾in (322mm) front, 11¾in (298mm) rear vented discs, with servo
Length 13ft 10in (4235mm)
Width 5ft 9in (1810mm)
Height 3ft 11in (1200mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 8in (2361mm)
Weight 2403lb (1090kg)
0-60mph 3.9 secs
Top speed 190mph **Mpg** 21.9
Price new £49,595 (2003)

NOBLE M12 GTO-3R

Sold/number built 2000-'05/700 (est, all M12s)
Construction steel spaceframe, integral rollcage, glassfibre composite body
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 2968cc V6, twin Garrett T25 turbochargers with electronic fuel management and injection
Max power 352bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque 350lb ft @ 3500-5000rpm
Transmission Getrag-Ford six-speed manual with Quaife automatic torque-biasing diff, RWD
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coil springs, Bilstein telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 13in (330mm) vented and cross-drilled discs, with servo
Length 13ft 4in (4089mm)
Width 5ft 11in (1828mm)
Height 3ft 9in (1143mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 11in (2438mm)
Weight 2380lb (1080kg)
0-60mph 3.7 secs
Top speed 170mph **Mpg** 25 (est)
Price new £49,950 (2003)

PORSCHE 911 (996) CARRERA 4

Sold/number built 1998-2004/12,089
Construction steel monocoque
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 3387cc flat-six, Bosch DME engine management with sequential fuel injection
Max power 296bhp @ 6800rpm
Max torque 258lb ft @ 4600rpm
Transmission six-speed manual, 4WD
Suspension independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts **rear** multi-link, coil spring/dampers units; anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 12¾in (318mm) front, 11¾in (299mm) rear vented discs, with servo and ABS
Length 14ft 6in (4432mm)
Width 5ft 9in (1765mm)
Height 4ft 3in (1306mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 2in (2352mm)
Weight 3031lb (1375kg)
0-60mph 5.2 secs
Top speed 174mph **Mpg** 27.2
Price new £64,585 (2000)

'The Noble's chassis has an otherworldly competence that allows you to exploit so much more of it'

The wonderful thing about TARGAS...

...is targas are wonderful things. But can Blackpool's best topple a Maranello icon?

WORDS **RUSS SMITH** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Racing is said to improve the breed, but it was a different form of competition that drove Maranello to produce its first genuinely usable Ferrari supercar. Honda (with the NSX) and Porsche (with the 993) had already managed it and were stealing sales from the Prancing Horse. So enter the Ferrari F355, still visually related to the 308, but with eye-watering performance, gobsmacking dynamic abilities and almost Germanic build quality.

Paul Clifford bought his F355 two years ago. "I had a Maserati 3200GT before and wanted something reliable," he explains. "These have that reputation, and to date I've only had to pay servicing costs. They're not hugely cheap, but they're no worse than a Mercedes."

Sold alongside the GTB and Spider, the GTS is the rarest of the F355s, with fewer than 500 sold in right-hand drive. The no-fuss roof simply unclips and stows behind the seats, leaving you with fresh air but not too much breeze, even at the kind of speeds we could indulge in at a test track. The Tuscan was a little more turbulent inside, but we were using it without the rear 'screen fitted. The glass pops out for extra ventilation – sometimes when you don't expect it on track days, or so I'm told.

Dave Howard's 2004 Tuscan S is an early Mk2 model, easily distinguished from the earlier cars by its covered headlamps and LCD dash. Dave traded up to this from a Chimaera 450: "I like the TVR community and, despite the Tuscan's fearsome reputation, I've found it easier and more predictable to drive than the Chimaera. It has also given no trouble apart from the cooling fans setting themselves off occasionally, when the car is parked or in the garage, and draining the battery."

'The Ferrari corners completely flat at any speed I have the bottle to attempt'

Forgivable stuff, especially once you have experienced the Tuscan. Making the most of lightweight materials and the homegrown Speed Six engine, it has a weapons-grade power-to-weight ratio that even shades that of the F355. There's no V8 kick up the backside, but an urgent, linear rush of power that keeps building like a rotary engine until you hit the limiter and grab another gear.

Even just sitting in the Tuscan takes you to another place, possibly one concocted for a Hollywood sci-fi movie. Beautifully machined aluminium sprouts from everywhere and the freakish dashboard is, well, academic once you hit the accelerator pedal. There's no time to look anywhere but straight ahead. Yet the

TVR TUSCAN S

Sold/number built 2000-'06/1832
Construction tubular steel chassis, glassfibre honeycomb body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3996cc straight-six, electronic fuel injection
Max power 360bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque 310lb ft @ 5250rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs
Weight 2464lb (1120kg)
0-60mph 4.2 secs
Top speed 180mph **Mpg** 17
Price new £44,750

Above: Tuscan's 'six' gives fearsome performance in such a light car. Top left: as befits a TVR of this era, the bonkers interior is straight out of a sci-fi epic

Tuscan S also surprises by being docile and friendly when you require it to be.

The F355 does that, too. You'd let grannie pop around to the Post Office in it. But the Ferrari is also an incredibly easy car to drive quickly. There's so much feel to all of the controls, along with an instant and predictable reaction to your slightest input. The power steering is perfectly weighted, but the best thing of all is the way that the car corners completely flat at any speed I have the bottle to attempt.

And then there's the noise: always sounding as if it has an urgent appointment somewhere, past 4000rpm it grows to an otherworldly howl so raw and scary it should carry an 18 rating. Once you hear it, you want some more. Slick six-speed gearbox, electronic dampers, and it fits like a glove: with that roof panel off, this is, for me, the perfect driving machine.

Thanks to *Club Scuderia (clubscuderia.co.uk); PistonHeads (pistonheads.com)*

Above: glorious Ferrari V8 sounds like no other, wailing away at high revs. Top: later F1 model got paddle-shift 'box – this one has open-gate manual

FERRARI F355 GTS

Sold/number built 1994-'99/11,206
Construction steel monocoque, flat undertray with rear venturis
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank, 40v 3496cc V8, Bosch fuel injection
Max power 380bhp @ 8250rpm
Max torque 268lb ft @ 6000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, electronic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo and ABS
Weight 3152lb (1430kg)
0-60mph 4.6 secs
Top speed 173mph **Mpg** 15
Price new £83,091

Speed demon

Before slipping beneath the waves, TVR built a tiny series of outrageous 200mph Tuscan R road-racers that burned brightly but briefly

WORDS ***SIMON HUCKNALL*** *PHOTOGRAPHY* ***JOHN BRADSHAW***

Ambition and optimism. The latter is a vital ingredient of the former, and in the low-volume car business both need to be in bountiful supply. Yet it's important not to overdose on either: just ask any start-up with a 'groundbreaking' 200mph-plus concept that never evolved beyond just that, after boring – but essential – realities such as type approval, manufacturing and warranties presented themselves. And the need for money; lots of it.

Which is why it's remarkable that the car we're in today – a TVR T440R – existed at all. Sure, TVR was no fledgling brand but, even so, launching a car that was practically bespoke from the ground up, and capable of 215mph, was still an envelope-pushing programme for its small, budget-stifled development team. Added to which, almost all of this *wünder*-car's componentry – engine, chassis, body, trim – was homespun at the Bristol Avenue plant in Blackpool. And even at the start of this century, its £75,000 price-tag was by far the cheapest way to the double-ton. From a company whose profits derived from an annual output rarely exceeding 1000 cars, that was no mean feat.

But Peter Wheeler, TVR's enigmatic boss, had a vision. Not since 1962, when a factory-entered Grantura raced at Le Mans (completing three laps before retiring), had TVR considered returning to the 24 Hours. There had been other competition successes in the meantime: Prodsport in the 1970s with the 1600M and 3000M; Steve Cole's Tasmin winning 21 of 24 750 Motor Club Championship races in 1987 (after which the car was banned, due to TVR not building enough road versions); then the Tuscan series in the '90s, which contributed so much to raising TVR's profile, while also being a proving ground for Griffith componentry. Martin Short's Cerbera Speed Six assault in British GTs and the FIA GT Championship finished off the century. Le Mans, though, remained the itch Wheeler needed to scratch, and by 2000 its GT1 class was in his sights.

It helped that TVR was riding the crest of a low-volume sports car wave in the late '90s and early 2000s, providing the impetus and wherewithal to commit to such a daring race programme. With the Lotus Esprit in its death throes, a hole was emerging in the market for mid-sized, brawny sports cars with c300bhp. This left the door wide open for TVR to exploit demand, its Tuscan breathing fresh life into a range that in 1999 comprised the aged Griffith and Chimaera, plus the mighty Cerbera.

So, it was apt that the Tuscan's already competition-linked moniker should be used

'To mix it in the GT1 class on the Mulsanne, the Tuscan R needed a 200mph-plus top speed, hence extensive time spent in the wind tunnel'

Large, flat rear diffuser is the most obvious sign of the work put in to perfecting the aerodynamics of the slippery shape

for the road car to homologate Wheeler's GT1 racer. Development on the Tuscan R began in 1999 as a collaboration between TVR, with John Ravenscroft as chief designer/engineer, and Short's Rollcentre Racing, already synonymous with on-track success. While the homologation model's styling was clearly relatable to the road cars, everything else was completely bespoke, save its Tuscan-sourced wheels and headlights. That included a light, ultra-stiff carbonfibre body built around a tubular-steel chassis, and underpinned by an aluminium-honeycomb floorpan. Suspension was by classic double wishbones all round, with coils and gas-filled dampers, and a single anti-roll bar at the front.

To mix it in the GT1 class on the Mulsanne Straight, the Tuscan R needed a 200mph-plus top speed, hence it being the first TVR to spend extensive time in a wind tunnel. CAD/CAM technology helped produce an exceptional drag coefficient (for a sports car) of just 0.32. Truth be told, it was the Tuscan R's aerodynamic prowess, rather than sheer mechanical grunt, that achieved the claimed headline maximum of 215mph. Mechanically, the R initially used the 3996cc Speed Six straight-six seen in the Tuscan and smaller-capacity versions of the Cerbera. Power was upped from 380bhp to 400bhp for the first prototype, delivered to the rear wheels via a five-speed Borg-Warner T5 close-ratio gearbox and a limited-slip diff.

It was that prototype, registered Y276 XBV and originally purple, that was unveiled (by then painted silver) at the NEC British Motor Show in 2000 to great fanfare. But it wasn't long before the realities of productionising a homologation special began to take hold. The prototype's rear lights fell foul of type-approval regulations and, since they formed part of the body's composite moulding, it was decided to cut up the car and build a new one to present for approval, with a revised rear panel. In the end, two were built, due to the FIA requiring more than one variant: a 4-litre T400R (PN02 ZNG, pictured here), and a 4.2-litre T440R, later registered PL03 BXY – with the numbers in each name indicating proposed power output.

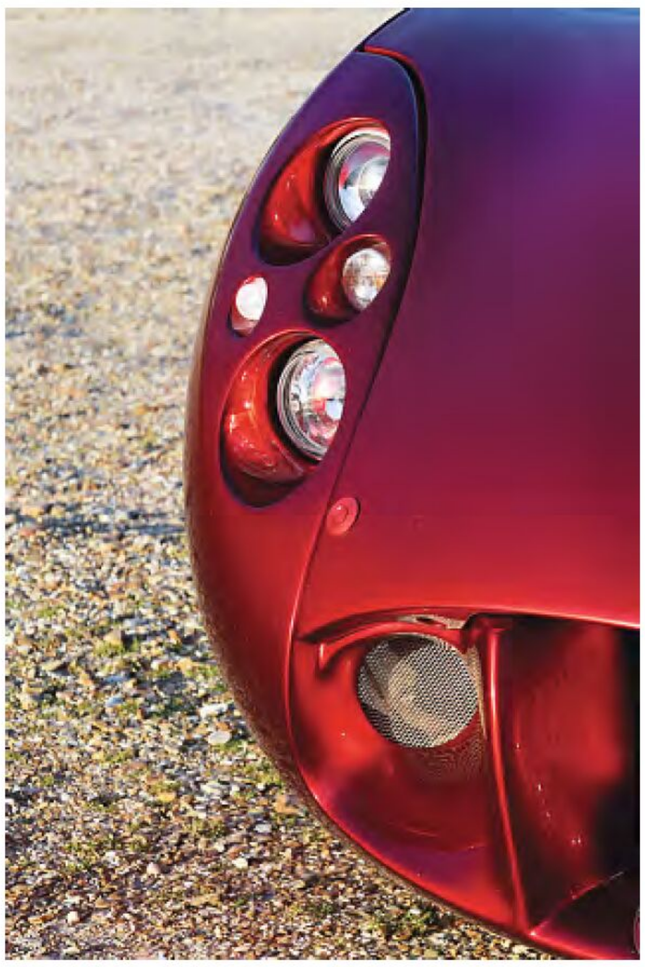
Customers had the choice of either model in two-seater guise, with a long-range fuel tank, or as a 2+2, with a 51-litre tank. But with just £3000 splitting their list prices (£71,995 and £74,995), the 4-litre was dropped before any had been sold. Confusingly, 'our' car – complete with earlier 4-litre unit – appeared in TVR's range brochure representing the more powerful 440. As you might imagine, TVR's PR machine – headed by Ben Samuelson, a devout company disciple and never afraid to court controversy – went into overdrive. Both cars were soon on TV, with Jeremy Clarkson pirouetting around the *Top Gear* track in ZNG, and Martin Brundle in BXY at Oulton Park for *Fifth Gear*.

In the midst of all the hype, two challenges remained. First, the feasibility of producing 25 customer cars to satisfy FIA homologation. If that was ever Wheeler's aim, it never materialised and, since photographic evidence was needed, it's likely that ZNG became multiple Tuscan Rs by dint of a range of different camera angles. In reality, just two T440Rs were built for paying customers: the first, registered YC53 GBW, was a 2+2 bought by Lawrence Tomlinson, who was then in discussion with Wheeler about buying TVR (he failed, but went on to purchase Ginetta two years later); the second, PL03 EHT, fell into Nikolai Smolenski's ownership after he did acquire TVR from Wheeler in 2004.

It was just before the company's sale that the second challenge was also resolved. With a new variant needed to replace the obsolete T400R, TVR took the Tuscan R to a whole new level with what became known as the T550R, or Typhon. Powered by a Vortech-supercharged version of the 4-litre Speed Six, one prototype – AF04 BYZ – was produced, this time sending its near-600bhp to the rear wheels via a six-speed sequential 'box. Alas, with the firm's sale imminent and further development frozen – not to mention cooling problems associated with the blower installation – the project never got off the ground. After the dust had settled following Smolenski's takeover, the Typhon

Left-right: shape is peak Wheeler-era TVR; Tuscan wheels; nostrils let hot air escape from the 'six'

Starting life as a 400bhp, 4-litre T400R, ZNG is now up to 4.4 litres and c415bhp to put it nearer to T440R specification



TVR T440R

Sold/number built 2002-'03/four (pre-production and production cars)
Construction steel tubular chassis, aluminium-honeycomb floor, carbonfibre body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 4397cc 'six', electronic fuel injection
Max power 415bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 385lb ft @ 6000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, adjustable telescopic dampers f/r; front anti-roll bar
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated front, solid rear discs
Length 14ft 5¼in (4404mm)
Width 6ft ¾in (1850mm)
Height 3ft 11¼in (1200mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 5¼in (2574mm)
Weight 2314lb (1050kg)
0-60mph 3.8 secs
Top speed 215mph **Mpg** n/a
Price new £74,995

Sculpted snout shares the Tuscan's headlights (left), with a revamped rear end (below)

name was retained to cover both models, though the only two production Typhons that emerged from Bristol Avenue had standard Tuscan S engines and five-speed 'boxes.

While Wheeler did achieve his GT1 dream – albeit with limited success (see panel) – TVR's future under new ownership was short-lived. Which makes this car particularly significant, as both Wheeler's swansong and the zenith of TVR's production-car ambitions. It's just as well that, after being stripped of its drivetrain and interior, and used as a replica racing car in sponsor DeWalt's colours to promote the works GT1 team, PN02 ZNG has since been returned to its former glory. Initially purchased from the factory by TVR specialist Racing Green, it was sold to current owner Richard Billings in 2008. Richard stored the car until 2014, after which he entrusted a full recommission to its original factory specification – albeit with a few revisions – to marque guru TVR 101.

Boss Stephen 'Woody' Woodrow's history with TVR tracks back almost three decades, starting with a stint with Team Autoskill, which ran the Tuscan Challenge cars. He remained in the racing arena, looking after Ferraris for QV Motorsport then establishing his own team, Whitton Motorsport. TVR 101 was formed in 2014, and restoring Richard's T440R has clearly been a labour of love for Woody and his team. With no original factory records or drawings available, the biggest challenge was recreating PN02 ZNG's interior after it had been stripped bare and fitted with bucket seats to resemble the GT1 racer. The door glass had been replaced with fixed Perspex but, remarkably, Woody found a company in Barcelona that was able to remanufacture them at a modest cost. The T440R's elaborate door cards were remade, using those from a surviving Typhon as a template. As for the rest of the cabin's trim, says Woody: "I just kept watching the interior shots of Clarkson driving ZNG on YouTube to get a sense of what it looked like when it was new."

Reintroducing ZNG's drivetrain into what was effectively a rolling chassis was more straightforward. Engine work was entrusted to Dom Trickett at Powers Performance, who was responsible for TVR's engines back in the day. A decision was made to fully optimise the performance, with a freshly built 4.4-litre Speed Six engine replacing the original 4-litre. The unit was tuned to be more road-friendly and now produces a dyno-supported 415bhp at 6000rpm and 385lb ft of torque, versus the factory's 2002 claims of 440bhp at 7400rpm and 350lb ft. That just left ZNG's body, which was repainted in Candy Apple Ruby Pearl, closely mimicking its 2002 hue, and replacement of the suspension's original fixed Bilstein damper units with adjustable items from Öhlins.

You never forget your first Wheeler TVR – for me it was road testing Tuscans for *Autocar*, so at least I remember that entering the cabin involves feeling for a button under the door mirror to trigger the latch. Even today, the T440R's interior feels shockingly *avant-garde*, with the exception of its manual handbrake and incongruously basic-looking three-spoke wheel. The exceptional quality of the swathe of leather that adorns everything from the dash to the broad centre console is likely an improvement on what would have emerged from Bristol Avenue all those years ago. You sit low, facing a chunky, hide-wrapped binnacle that houses a digital display, which you can scroll through to bring up multiple engine and speed readouts – everything, that is, apart from a rev counter, which is replaced by a line of change-up lights running above the display. Other than a pod atop the dash housing the audio unit, and small, unmarked window buttons set into the twin shafts that connect console to dash, all other controls gather behind the steering wheel, which adjusts for rake but not reach. Adjustable floor-mounted aluminium pedals complete the picture.

Nothing more elaborate than a twist of a key brings the T440R to life with a hearty rumble, but at once the engine feels tractable and untemperamental. A fairly light clutch and wonderfully mechanical-feeling, medium-throw gearchange make bumbling around at urban speeds surprisingly effortless. I'm not sure this car's gearing, combined with its more road-friendly power and torque characteristics, would allow you to see 215mph – it's tricky to estimate without a rev counter. Even so, first is tall, with the intermediate ratios closely stacked. You also need to dial in plenty of revs before you start to engage with the meat of this TVR's performance – and, given how box-fresh the motor is, we're being circumspect today. But there's an elasticity to the way its power is deployed, which can still be enjoyed at medium revs. Push harder on the long-travel throttle and it sounds like a steroid-injected Healey 3000 – guttural, raw and wholesome as only a big-capacity 'six' can be, amplified by the stiff carbon body.

This is, we should not forget, a pretty close copy of a racer. The touchy-feely directness you'd find in a regular Tuscan's helm is replaced by something a little less sensitive, which, if you were carving down the Mulsanne at the double-ton, would be welcome. As we head across gnarled South Downs roads to the coast, the Rose-jointed suspension is at times quite punishing, sending loud retorts through the cabin. Yet find a well-sighted, smooth stretch and you're rewarded with a level of control and grip – helped by extreme Toyo Proxes tyres – that would confound any regular TVR driver.

But it's the thought that this car is essentially a Le Mans racer with numberplates that really takes your breath away. The Tuscan R was Wheeler's final throw of his TVR dice, and I can think of no better tribute to the indelible mark he left on a once maverick brand.

Thanks to *Drew Wheeler Sports & Classics (drewwheeler.co.uk); Stephen Woodrow, TVR 101 (tvr101.co.uk)*

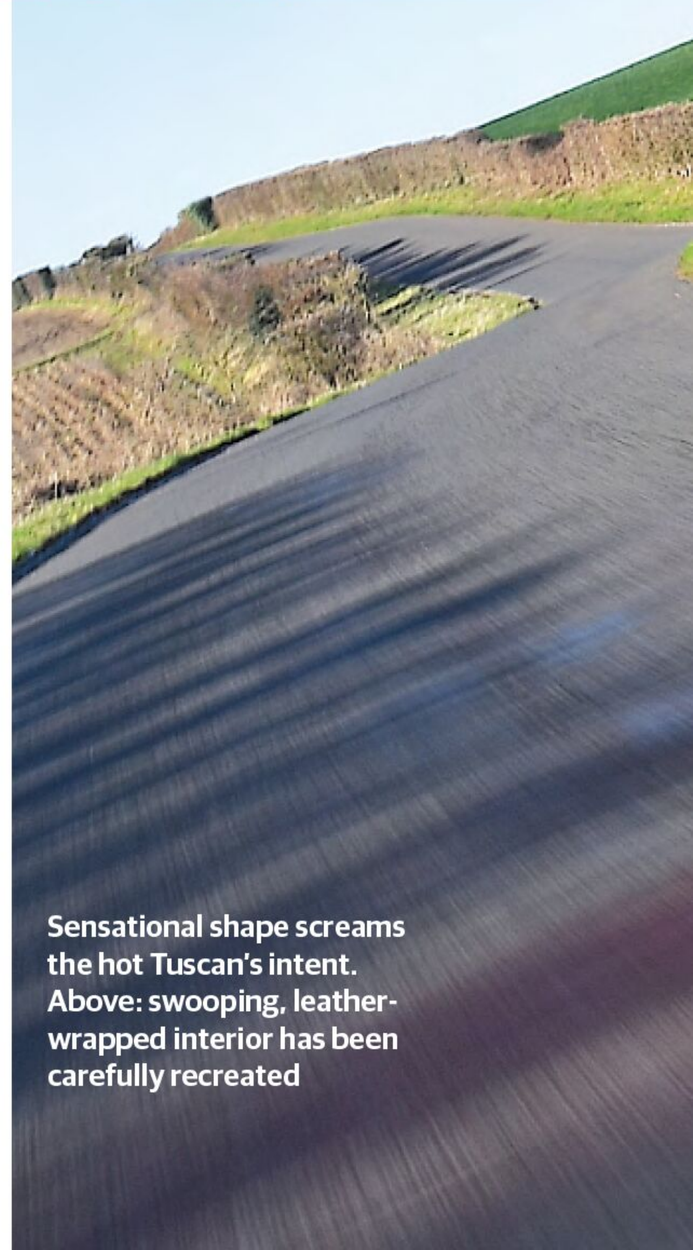
GETTY

WHEELER'S 24-HOUR DREAM COMES TRUE

Initially campaigned in the British GT Championship for the 2001-'02 season, TVR's T400Rs made their first appearance at the Le Mans 24 Hours in 2003, run by the Racesport Salisbury team, sponsored by DeWalt. Neither car finished the race, with one crashing and the other retiring due to transmission failure.

Better fortune was to follow in 2004, though, with the Chamberlain-Synergy Motorsport-entered T400Rs (above) coming 21st and 22nd overall, and eighth and ninth in the LM GT class.

Two T400Rs were entered again in the 2005 event, but only the example run by Racesport Peninsula TVR competed in the GT2 class, with an unclassified finish.



Sensational shape screams the hot Tuscan's intent. Above: swooping, leather-wrapped interior has been carefully recreated

Fastback roofline allows the option of two-seater or 2+2 configuration

'Push harder on the long-travel throttle and it sounds like a steroid-injected Healey 3000 – guttural, raw and wholesome'

BLACKPOOL

Love them or hate them, TVRs polarised opinion for more than 60 years. Here, eight of the Lancashire firm's key models chart the marque's eventful history

WORDS **ALASTAIR CLEMENTS** PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

PEERS

For any other company it would spell disaster. The news on 18 October 2006 that, after 59 years in Blackpool, TVR would be moving its production abroad should threaten the very essence of this most individual of marques. But TVR thrives on bombshells, and its Blitz spirit has seen it though a factory fire, bankruptcy and ownership changes – the last, in 2004, taking it out of British hands for the first time.

And you get the feeling that, if its new owner remembers what's important, it'll get through this, too. Because with TVR it's as much about the people as the machinery. The people who love them in spite of the cars' foibles. The people who build them, with a passion – if perhaps not always a level of quality – matched only by the craftsmen of Malvern or Newport Pagnell. And, above all, the people who have steered the good ship TVR through often choppy seas, injecting its models with a unique character that comes across as strongly as the whiff of resin and matting.

To celebrate 60 years since Trevor Wilkinson lopped three letters from his unglamorous Christian name to form TVR Engineering in 1947, *C&SC* gathered selected highlights from the firm's eventful history. It all began – though you soon find that with TVR there's always more than one truth – with an Alvis Special constructed in an old wheelwright's workshop in Blackpool. Wilkinson's first chassis followed in 1949, with sidevalve Ford power and clothed in simple metal panels. TVRs 2 and 3 followed a similar formula, before Wilkinson discovered glassfibre and mated an RGS Atalanta body to a revised chassis to create the Sports Saloon.

A new, all-independently sprung chassis arrived in 1955 and Wilkinson found the backers to fund TVR's move into a former brickworks on nearby Hoo Hill Industrial Estate. An open sports car came first, with both the front and rear bodywork taken from a Rochdale rear-end mould, followed by a notchback GT that evolved into the first true 'production' TVR in 1958: the Grantura.

Brett Langford's Grantura Mk1 demonstrates the precedent that survived into the new millennium: hand-laid, lightweight glassfibre bodywork; multi-tubular steel chassis with independent suspension; front-mounted, volume-production engine driving the rear wheels. Get past the tiny door aperture and, once you have squeezed into the bucket seat behind the big, thin-rimmed wheel and tall

Glassfibre body was bonded to chassis on early cars. Below: B-series shared with MGA; tail-lights inset on MkIs, moved outboard to fins for MkII

BRETT LANGFORD
1959 GRANTURA Mk1

1489cc MG in-line four, 68bhp, 77lb ft, 0-60mph in 11 secs, 100mph+

Brett Langford is more interested in involvement than ever-increasing power: "My brother had a wedge and I bought an S1 in '96. I swapped it for a Griffith but hardly used it so decided to get something I could tinker with and that you don't see every day. I found this in Carlisle, fell in love with it and drove it home the same day. It's bumpy, noisy and hard work but great fun. It's one of the oldest in the club and I haven't seen another on the road."

dashboard, it's fairly roomy. Brett's car is powered by a 1489cc B-series MG engine, but Granturas also came with Ford or Coventry Climax power, giving up to 110mph for minimal outlay in kit form. Mated to an MG-sourced gearbox with lovely short throw and a tight gate, the B-series offers lively throttle response and plenty of torque, accompanied by a rasping, slightly flatulent exhaust note. The inverted steering box provides a far sharper response than its Ford Anglia donor and the tiny wheelbase gives an agile feel: the little TVR darts into tight bends and squirms its way out. On skinny rubber (later radials replace the original crossplies), the Grantura likes to steer from the rear – thank the rubber mounts of the Beetle-sourced trailing-arm suspension for that – but is hugely entertaining around the tight Curborough Sprint Circuit. Fortunately the surface here is smooth: even the smallest bumps upset its firm springing, giving a vintage feel compared to the Lotus Elan that appeared just four years later.

After a name change to Layton Sports Cars, and later to TVR Cars Ltd, the firm continued to evolve the Grantura, but its increasingly marginalised founder departed in 1962 and by the end of the year the factory gates had closed. Reborn as Grantura Engineering, TVR restarted production and an approach from US-based dealer Jack Griffith in 1963 instigated its most exciting car yet: the Griffith. With the 289cu in Ford V8 shoehorned into a Grantura MkIII chassis, it yielded up to 271bhp and 160mph. But shipping strikes limiting exports – and the collapse of the stunning, Trevor Fiore-designed Trident project – cost the company dear. By the summer of 1965, the receivers had been called in once again.

This time bankruptcy would prove a blessing in disguise, because it put enthusiasts back in charge – automotive engineer and Griffith owner Martin Lilley, plus his father and financial backer Arthur – and brought a return to the old TVR Engineering name. The Lilleys' first job was to improve quality with the MkIV 1800S and Cortina-powered Vixen. When revival of the Trident proved impossible, and the rear-engined (also Fiore-designed) Tina foundered, Lilley reverted to the Griffith formula with the more luxurious Tuscan V8 in 1967. A 4½in wheelbase stretch (to 7ft 6in) followed months later, which makes hopping aboard the Ian Massey-Crosse Tuscan a doddle. With the combination of a small, fat steering wheel and a whopping great V8 sitting over the front wheels, piloting the Tuscan isn't the fingertip operation of the Grantura yet some of that car's delicacy remains, plus a dose of precision from the new rack-and-pinion set-up. But proceedings are always dominated by the sledgehammer-in-the-back effet unleashed by every prod of the throttle. There's a delicious cackling rumble – notably different to later TVR V8s – at low revs, but drop a ratio in the meaty Toploader gearbox, let the revs climb and the performance is staggering – at 13.8 secs from 0-100mph, the Tuscan was the fastest-accelerating car *Motor* had tested. Add the still hyper-sharp turn-in, short wheelbase and Triumph-derived Girling brakes that are truly extended by the overwhelming pace, and it makes for a concentration-focusing drive – but an incredibly rewarding one.

Adding 4in to the width of the Tuscan for the US market, plus a Ford 'Essex' V6 for British buyers in 1969, laid the foundations for the firm's most significant new model launch in 1972. The M-series was built in the new Bristol Avenue works, into which TVR had moved two years earlier, and boasted a new chassis designed by Mike Bigland for more comfort,

rigidity and ease of production, fresh bodywork derived from the wide-body Tuscan and a trio of engine options: Ford 1600, Triumph 2500 and Ford V6 for the range-topping 3000M.

After a few sweaty-palmed laps aboard the Tuscan, Pietro Abate's beautiful 3000M comes as something of a relief. Its steering, though low-geared, feels light and fluid; the timber-faced dash – peppered with familiar-looking borrowed switchgear – and small, three-spoke wheel give a familiarly British feel, while the corduroy-covered seats are comfortable. It's not particularly spacious, though, and there is some ergonomic unpleasantness – it's near-impossible to heel-and-toe and the gearlever cranks awkwardly forward, making it tricky to judge changes through the four-speed Ford transmission. With half the horsepower of the Tuscan, performance was always going to be rather down on its fire-breathing ancestor, but there are no complaints about the way the hearty 2994cc Essex V6 delivers its 192lb ft of torque. The revised chassis is a gem, too: neutral and tending towards oversteer, but without the power to make that a perilous state.

'With hyper-sharp turn-in, a short wheelbase and brakes extended by the overwhelming pace, it makes for a concentration-focusing drive'

For many enthusiasts, the M-series and its spin-offs – the spectacular 230bhp Turbo (which was a British industry first), the limited-edition Martin (built to celebrate 10 years of Lilley TVRs), the hatchback-equipped Taimar and the 3000S (the first production TVR convertible) – will always be inextricably linked with barely clad *Men Only* models. An idea dreamed up by playboy Lilley to ensure his 1971 motor show cars attained maximum column inches in the press, the bonnet-mounted nude proved a highly successful '70s marketing tool. But for 1979 the cars created enough of a stir on their own. Penned by Oliver Winterbottom, the stylist responsible for the '70s Lotus Elite and Éclat, with an all-new chassis by fellow Lotus man Ian Jones, the Tasmin range was something of an anomaly as the only car – 1971 SM Zante prototype aside – to deviate from TVR's traditional curves. It was a diversion that would last: 2618 'wedges' were produced over 12 years before the last 400SE left the Bristol Avenue works in 1991.

Launched as a short-tail coupé, Tasmin convertible and Plus Two versions soon

IAN MASSEY-CROSSE
1967 TUSCAN V8

4727cc Ford V8, 271bhp, 314lb ft, 0-60mph in 5 secs, 160mph

With a 200,000-mile Taimar daily driver and his first Grantura at 225k, Ian Massey-Crosse has a long history with TVR. "I first met the Tuscan in 1983 when Paul Weldon brought it to a TVR Car Club meet," he says. "Paul race-prepared it and I started looking after it in '85 – with four Webers it had 415bhp and won its Historic Sports Car Club class twice. It last raced in 1990 and I got it in 1995. You grow horns when you drive it, but I treat it with respect – it's 300bhp and less than a tonne!"

From top: detuned former racer still boasts more than 300bhp; modified cabin is more luxurious than Griffith; Cortina MkII rear lamps

From top: M-series chassis balance is good, but it the lacks the thrills of the V8-powered cars; torquey Essex V6; snug but comfortable cabin

PIETRO ABATE
1979 3000M

2994cc Ford V6, 142bhp, 192lb ft, 0-60mph in 7.6 secs, 124mph

After 12 years, Pietro Abate remains passionate about his first sports car: "I love the shape and I have lots of fun in it – it feels just right, not too outrageous. I was looking for a wedge, but then fell in love with this. In '96 someone keyed it, so with my friend Justin's help I restored the whole car in just eight months. I could have left it in the garage, but I rebuilt it to drive – I've done 50,000 miles. I'd like a Vixen, but couldn't get rid of this – there's bits of me in there!"

followed – the latter, the firm's first four-seater, boasting a different bodyshell with shorter nose and longer tail, which was soon adopted for the fixed-head two-seater. The familiar TVR recipe was unchanged, but under the skin the chassis had been completely redesigned and there were new engines – Ford 'Cologne' 2.8-litre V6 and four-pot 'Pinto' 2.0-litre – along with an automatic option for the first time.

Unfortunately the new model's rumoured £500,000 development costs – and the lack of immediate sales success – would plumb the depths of the Lilleys' pockets, and late in 1981 the duo handed control to another marque enthusiast, Peter Wheeler. The chain-smoking, straight-talking Wheeler somehow epitomised the marque's politically incorrect image as it blasted its way through the 1980s and '90s, and in the process he would become its longest-serving and most successful custodian.

Wheeler's influence was immediate and had an enormous impact. First came a return to the American market, followed by a search for more performance. Abandoning Lilley's Tasmin Turbo concept, Wheeler turned to the tried and tested, Buick-derived, Rover-built all-aluminium V8. In fuel-injected SD1 Vitesse form the compact unit boasted 190bhp (later 197bhp) and endowed the 1983 Tasmin 350i with the performance to live up to the junior supercar looks. And, as Dan Rogers' two-tone Convertible proves, it sounded fantastic: a symphony of cylinders, pushrods and valves undiluted by convoluted exhaust systems. The small-capacity V8 spins more freely than bigger, torquier applications, its urgent song

Factory test mule wears 350SE alloys and two-tone paint. Right: small V8 makes great noise. Below: Dan made new interior from scratch

DAN ROGERS
1986 350i CONVERTIBLE

3528cc Rover V8, 197bhp, 220lb ft, 0-60mph in 6.6 secs, 136mph

Living on a local dealer's test route led to Dan Rogers buying his TVR a decade ago – before he could even drive: "It was a factory press car that was left standing for years. I couldn't insure it until I was 21, and it had no interior trim until I restored it last year. It costs peanuts to run – I've averaged 30mpg across 1500 miles around Europe. Most people hate the wedges, but I like the shape – it's so '80s. It's extreme, politically incorrect and sounds great; I'll never sell it."

accompanied by genuinely thrilling pace – try 0-60mph in just 6.6 secs. The introduction of the 275bhp, 150mph 390SE in 1984 signalled the start of the wedge's evolution into ever more extreme incarnations – culminating in the ludicrously bespoilered 420SEAC – but the 350i remains the sweet-spot of wedge production. All too often detractors focus on the door-stop looks rather than its ability: with a longer (7ft 10in) chassis and 3in-wider track than the M-series, the 350i feels brilliantly planted and its wishbone front/trailing arm rear set-up is far better damped than its predecessors – remember, this chassis managed to cope with more than 300bhp in later life. It's a shame the optional, over-light power steering robs some of the confidence the chassis imbues: albeit heavy, the unassisted Cortina rack makes the car easier to place and trust. But the wedge's Cubist cabin is a disaster. The innovative roof design (with a removable panel and fold-down roll bar) that would survive until the Chimaera affords useful stowage space behind the seats, but the ceiling is low, your backside is pinched, the wheel sits low on your legs and the footwell is surprisingly tight for such a large car.

Nonetheless the wedge sold well, particularly in 350i form, even though its styling was always an acquired taste and its price-tag hefty. What Wheeler needed to boost sales was an entry-level car, and it arrived in 1986 in the shape of the S. Predating by a decade the modern trend for nostalgia-trip styling, the S mated a 280i drivetrain to an evolution of the 3000S shape and a bargain sticker price. There was some cost-cutting – manual windows, drum rear brakes, cloth trim – but buyers weren't put off and TVR production doubled to meet demand. Slip into Sam Moody's S3 and you find

S3 has classic British sports car feel and was a sales hit. Left, from top: 'Cologne' V6 out to 2.9 litres from S2; 4in longer doors aid entry to cabin

SAM MOODY
1990 S3

2935cc Ford V6, 170bhp, 172lb ft, 0-60mph in 7.1 secs, 130mph

"I had an MG Midget and a Porsche 944 before this," says Sam Moody, who has enjoyed his S3 for the past four summers. "The Midget was great but had no oomph; the 944 lacked the raw feel of a British sports car and its roof didn't come off. I prefer the S1/S2 dash, but wanted the longer doors of the S3 – and now I would only swap it for a Griffith 500. I love the noise and the smile it puts on your face – plus its retro styling won't date like some more modern TVRs."

it's not just the styling that's retro. The revised dashboard is more coherent than that of the S/S2, with a traditional but slightly unfinished feel – corner enthusiastically and your knee starts adjusting the electric mirrors via a switch mounted on the inside of the transmission tunnel. But fire up the 'Cologne' V6 – stretched to 2.9 litres for the S2 – and any doubts are cast aside. This was created as a classic sports car in the then-defunct TR/MG mould: simple, good-looking and a riot to drive. The steering gives an ideal balance between weight and response, making it feel light and chuckable. Like the 3000M, the S chassis with its semi-trailing-link rear end allows for a certain amount of tail-out hooliganism, but this time there's the power to exploit it should you feel so inclined – all the while accompanied by a cultured V6 thrum. And, again like the 3000M, you imagine it must be great to live with and travel long distances in: without the fear factor of the V8 cars, but also losing some of their thrill.

Attempts to restore that excitement were made with the Tuscan, which never hit the road but spawned a successful race series, and the 1991 V8S. A 3.9-litre, 240bhp Rover V8 and all-disc brakes were enough to ensure that the V8S effectively killed off the last wedges and paved the way for the forthcoming new generation of TVRs, spearheaded by the gorgeous Griffith. First shown at the 1990 motor show, the Griff caused a sensation and yielded a flurry of orders. But customers had a three-year wait while the model was re-engineered, the show car's V8S underpinnings ditched in favour of a heavily modified Tuscan racer chassis.

Available initially as the 240bhp 4.0 or the 280bhp 4.3, the Griffith was joined after just a year by the Chimaera, which offered slightly softer suspension and a bigger boot in an effort to appeal to a wider audience. The more civilised car soon became a best-seller, but never achieved the reverence that the Griffith generates among fans. Which is why we asked Rob Pack to bring his car along. It's not any old Griffith, but the ultimate incarnation: the 340bhp, 5-litre 500 run-out model. Few will argue that the Griff was the best-looking TVR yet – and many (me included) reckon it has yet to be bettered, its voluptuous shape uncluttered by such practicalities as doorhandles or bumpers. The curves continued within, where swooping lines and quirky details dominate a cabin that gives British craftsmanship without appearing cheesily retro.

Not that you'll notice: you will be too busy concentrating. Like the Tuscan, this Griffith demands full attention at all times and delivers dollops of terror and excitement in tandem. Grip and braking take a massive leap forward as you might expect, but the Griffith also feels heavier and more physical than its potent ancestor. There's a touch of understeer on turn-in, but this TVR is set up to wag its tail at every opportunity and you need to be ready to wind on opposite lock if you consider doing

Clockwise: gorgeous Griffith is a riot to drive; cabin previews future TVRs; venerable Rover V8 bored out to 5 litres for its last application

ROB PACK
1996 GRIFFITH 500

4997cc Rover V8, 340bhp, 360lb ft, 0-60mph in 4.1 secs, 160mph

Rob Pack's decision to buy a TVR was prompted by a very practical problem: "I looked at Boxsters, Elans and Z3s, but couldn't fit in – and there's plenty of room in the Griff. You don't see many of them on the road and it's a lovely shape. My first, a 4.0, was British Racing Green and blended into the background. I spotted this car in the local dealer two years ago; I use it daily when the weather's good and do several track days – the 'Ring and Spa last year. It's been completely reliable."

Supercar-quick Cerbera demands concentration. Below: TVR's first engine is a monster; vent in wheel helps in stifling cabin

anything with the pedals mid-corner – no wonder they are such a handful on a circuit. Performance is huge and the fat twin tailpipes provide a simply epic soundtrack, a stirring bassline overlaid as the revs rise by an overture that would drown out all three tenors in full cry. Almost certainly a wearing day-to-day companion, the Griffith nevertheless remains a deeply involving and joyful machine. If TVR is all about drama, noise and fury, then surely the Griffith defines the marque.

But with the 500, TVR reached the limit of economically viable power boosts for the pushrod Rover V8, so in 1992 Peter Wheeler revealed the prototype for the firm's first engine: the AJP8. Designed by Al Melling, whose initial joins those of John Ravenscroft

'Like the Tuscan, the Griffith demands full attention at all times and delivers dollops of terror and excitement in tandem'

and Wheeler himself in the motor's codename, the new unit was planned for launch in the Griffith. So when TVR announced its new Cerbera two-plus-two in 1993, it was supposed to appear with Rover power. Yet by the time the new engine reached buyers in 1996 – after extensive running in the Tuscan Challenge in an effort to dispel reliability fears – the plans had been swapped: the Griffith got a bored-out Rover unit and TVR's 4.2-litre V8 was slotted into the Cerbera. And the all-alloy, dry-sump unit is a monster. Nicky Thompson's brooding Storm Grey Cerbera needs nothing more than a whiff of throttle in any gear to dispatch Curborough's tiny straights, yet this engine achieves its incredibly elastic punch without resorting to clever valvegear (there's just two valves per cylinder) or heads (there's a single overhead cam per bank). Like modern Ferrari V8s, the AJP8 uses a flat-plane crank and, instead of a classic V8 burble, acceleration is accompanied by a deafening, obnoxious blare – it's hardly pretty, but seriously addictive. The Cerbera's big boot and kid-friendly rear seats make it a car you could justify using, but as usual there are compromises. The steering is super-light and terrifyingly fast – yet the lock is awful. Only when you stand beside a Cerbera do you realise just how low it is – which makes entry and exit a singularly inelegant process – and, despite the long wheelbase, the handling is very senior indeed. Relax behind the odd-looking two-spoke wheel at your peril.

Having finally got its own motor to market, TVR didn't sit back to see how it performed, but instead raced ahead with further engine development. First the V8 was stretched to 4.5 litres, then another four cylinders were added for the simply barking Speed 12. One bank of the V12 became the Speed Six, which was soon the sole engine option in the TVR range. The second revival of the Tuscan name in 1999 signalled the dawn of a new design language, and remained the staple model while TVR experimented with a bewildering array of variants based around the same six-pot powerplant. But it is the Sagaris that made the breakthrough as far as the motoring press was concerned: finally, the road test eulogies began to lose their 'for a TVR' provisos.

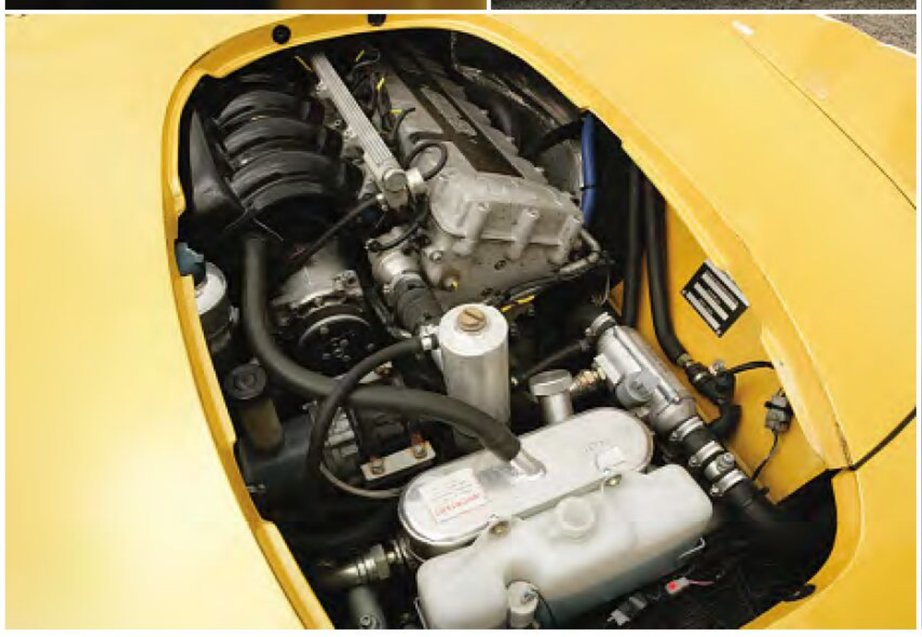
Mating the T350 chassis with the Tuscan's 4-litre engine, the Sagaris still requires a firm hand but allows the driver to take liberties once turned into a corner that would send you off into the scenery in a Cerbera or Griffith. And you can't deny it's distinctive. In Halcyon Midas Gold, Ray and Pauline Frost's Sagaris stands out even in this spectacular company. Inside, it's just as dramatic. Some 85% of the Sagaris was made in-house and the controls look to have come from NASA's parts bin rather than that of Ford or Leyland. With 406bhp propelling just 1078kg, performance is brutal, though the

NICKY THOMPSON
1997 CERBERA 4.2

4185cc TVR V8, 350bhp, 320lb ft, 0-60mph in 4 secs, 185mph

"A Griffith spun in front of me at the traffic lights and I thought it was beautiful," says Nicky Thompson. "I followed it to find out what it was, then bought myself a Chimaera for Christmas! I'm on my second Chimaera and I got the Cerbera last year – then took it to Le Mans two days later. It has opinions and I'll never master it, but we have a mutual respect. The Chimaera is my love, the Cerbera my affair – it's so exciting, I can't be without it."

Clockwise: impeccable grip and balance; digital dash adds to otherworldly feel; from straight-six to styling, Sagaris is all drama; exquisite cast-alloy hinge; unusual exhausts



straight-six needs working much harder than the Cerbera's V8 to achieve that pace, plus the brakes and balance are leagues ahead of its predecessors and inspire real confidence. TVR's persistent refusal to accept servo assistance and ABS results in a brake pedal that – though hugely effective – feels near-solid on first contact. Thankfully the steering geometry has been revised to account for road driving and it's exceptionally accurate, if light. But perhaps the biggest disappointment is the noise. The soul-stirring mechanical cacophony of earlier cars' V6s and V8s has been replaced by an artificial soundtrack seemingly created entirely by exhaust tuning. Nonetheless, the Sagaris must surely banish TVR's reputation for 'so nearly great' cars. Get used to the looks – a not entirely easy task – and you'll discover a sports car of exceptional competence.

Just because the marque was founded by a Lancashire lad called Trevor rather than an Italian called Enzo, favours raw performance over practicality, and lacks the race-winning history of its similarly unglamorous Norfolk cousin, TVR has always lurked on the periphery of the super-sports-car mainstream into which Ferrari, Porsche and Lotus are accepted without question. Though respected for their performance-per-pound and aural and visual drama, its cars have long been seen at best as an individual or 'brave' choice, at worst as the brunt of jokes. With rumours emerging that future models will be assembled by Bertone in Turin, with powertrains produced in Britain, perhaps those Italian suits will give TVR the credibility it deserves while its heart continues to beat in Blackpool. Let's hope so. The world is a less colourful place without it.

RAY FROST
2005 SAGARIS

3996cc TVR straight-six, 406bhp, 349lb ft, 0-60mph in 3.9 secs, 185mph

"I've had a Lotus Elite, Elan and +2, but had hankered after a TVR," says Ray Frost. "My son told me to 'get the biggest and fastest or you'll only trade it in' – he knows me better than I know myself!" A Cerbera 4.5 came first, but wife Pauline – the TVRCC mid-Essex regional organiser – hated it: "It was an animal. The Sagaris is friendlier, but it will go round the outside of any other TVR on a track."

STEVEMCQUEENBYRENAULD

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